

PRAISE FOR JACK VEASEY'S EARLIER WORK

A true poet. — Rita Mae Brown

Jack Veasey's poems mourning his father are unique in modern poetry — and welcome, for the absence of the usual father-son problems, honoring, instead, his open-hearted grief. Perhaps it is because of this that Jack Veasey emerges from these poems as a man firmly rooted in the earth from which he sprang ... powerful. — Edward Field

My own belief is that any writer who writes one line I can't forget is a poet. Jack Veasey, in his wonderful scope, goes deep into his unexplored personal mines. His grasp of form, image and language are graceful and true. His revelations and discoveries are gifts to the reader. And the lines! There are so many. How they gleam! Damn good stuff. — Eric Blau

Jack Veasey's poetry comes like a shaft of cold air into a stuffy room.

— Barbara A. Holland

PRESS ACCLAIM FOR JACK VEASEY'S RECENT BOOK, SHAPELY

The poet laureate has to be able to relate to many different types of people, from grassroots bohemians to the Union League bowtie-wearing crowd. It's too bad that the Fishtown-born poet Jack Veasey is now a Harrisburg native. Veasey would make a good Philadelphia poet laureate. — Thom Nickels, *The Huffington Post*

Poet Jack Veasey writes stories — hard, nitty-gritty, ironic, heartfelt stories. Many of Veasey's poems exhibit his struggle of growing up gay in the tough Fishtown neighborhood of Philadelphia, where Archie Bunker types ruled and where the nuns in his Catholic school were tougher than old meat. It also didn't help that Veasey had the attitudes and values of a hippie in this place and at this time. "The neighborhood's old atmosphere still pervades a lot of my work. It gave me an outsider's perspective and made me identify with the underdog. That colors a lot of my choices of subjects, and the viewpoints from which I write, even when they aren't my own. Poetry is my life," Veasey muses. "I continue to write for pretty much the same reason as I continue to breathe." The narrative poems relay that yearning, the pangs, the loss. "It's how I make sense of being in the world." — Lori M. Myers, *The Burg*, Harrisburg, PA

ALSO BY JACK VEASEY

Handful of Hair (1975)

The Truth of Blue (1983)

Tourist Season (1984)

No Time for Miracles (1989)

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Shapely: Selected Formal Poems (2013)



THE DANCE THAT BEGINS AND BEGINS

SELECTED POEMS 1973-2013

JACK VEASEY



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ISBN 0-922558-78-7 Also available as a PDF ebook

This is the 211th publication of THE POET'S PRESS 2209 Murray Avenue #3 Pittsburgh, PA 15217

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PREFACE

My intention with this collection of poems – though its subtitle is "Selected Poems 1973-2013," and the poems in it are drawn from that whole forty year period of time — is not so much to offer up a general Selected Poems book as to tell the story of my life and psyche up to this point. As a gay man born in the middle of the repressive 1950s to working class Irish Catholic parents in a rough inner city American East Coast neighborhood — and who came of age in the wild 1970s — I've had a lot of vivid, often difficult, experience to process. I find myself with things to say about relationships, politics, sexuality, spirituality, and other subjects. But I couldn't really organize these poems chronologically in a way that would effectively tell my story and convey my meanings.

Instead, I've organized the poems into sections that deal with particular "territory" I've covered — certain kinds of experiences and relationships I've had, and of things I've witnessed, that were common to folks like me in my time and place, and in some cases still are. The section titles give strong clues as to the nature of these experiences and situations. You could say the sections are "thematic," but that's a bit more general than what I really mean. In some cases, poems grouped in the same section may be set in very different places and periods of time. The poems themselves are mostly linear; the order in which I've arranged them is not. Events of a particular type may have occurred repeatedly throughout my life, but their effects — the insights they gave me, the ways they've changed me — have been gradual and cumulative. The order of the poems reflects that psychic "timeline," not a literal chronology.

The first section, "Shaken Foundations," deals with growing up, young adulthood, family (including the conflicts common to many of us — and the deaths of family members that impact on us early in life). "Nuts And Bolts" explores sexuality and the gay subculture of the 1970s. "Distances" reflects on encounters with homophobia and religious bigotry. "Conditions" reflects on my changing environments — urban and then, later in life, small town and rural experiences — and things I've witnessed in both circumstances. "Sideshow" observes culture, from mythology to films and comic books. Finally, "That Evening Sun" comes from a mature perspective, examining such things as struggles with health issues, the passing of friends, the comforts and difficulties of long-term domestic life, and even, eventually, epiphanies that I'd call spiritual, for want of a better term. This last section's title seems familiar because it comes from the lyrics of the classic song "St. Louis Blues." It's also the title of my favorite William Faulkner story.

Also: about my use of the second person — when I address a poem to "You," it is not necessarily a poem written to my life partner. These poems are drawn from a long period of time, and many of them deal with people and experiences from the distant past. There are also times when I address a poem to a "You" when I am, in fact, talking to myself.

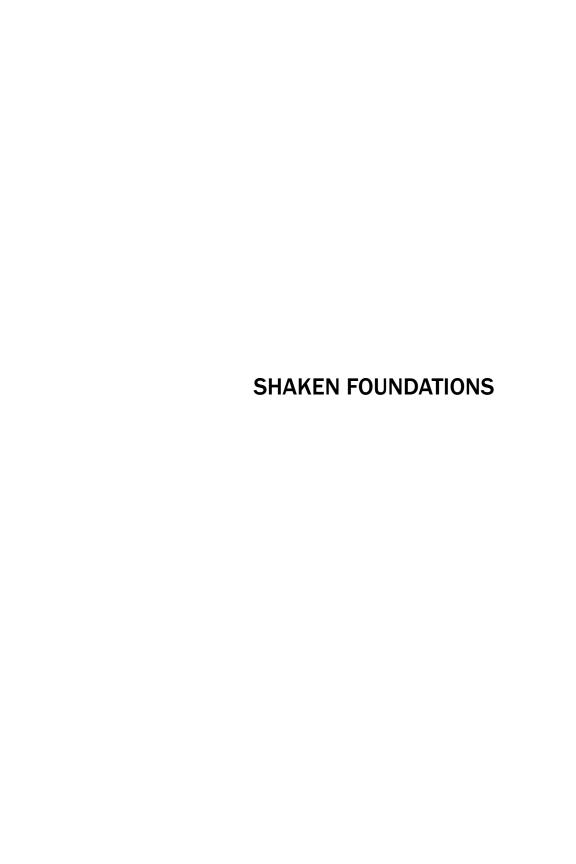
I haven't included notes on individual poems this time because my poems in this collection are mostly fairly straightforward narratives.

— Jack Veasey



THE DANCE THAT BEGINS AND BEGINS

This collection is dedicated to my partner in life, the sweet and saintly David Walker, with all my love.



A CHILD'S GOD

They leave him and turn out the lights. He is not tired, but they tell him it's time to sleep.

When he closes his eyes, a square of pale green light appears, right at the center of that blackness that is always there when he closes his eyes. For a moment, he has a green night-light, relieving the dark of the room beyond his eyelids. But he can't hold the green glow in his view; it fades, as does the trail of red sparks that remain with him a half-second longer. Then there is only the dark, and whatever it holds.

What is this dark?
Is it nothing?
Is it just
the absence of light?
Or is it a place
in which things hide
and wait,
and when he falls asleep
they'll show themselves,
come out to play those dramas
they call "dreams?"

This little boy
wants to know.
And so,
in the dark,
he asks God.
But the boy gets
no answer.
And still, he refuses to think
he is in here alone;

because he is afraid of the dark;

and, if he is afraid, there must be something there.

MR. MARTIN

Mr. Martin was my high school typing teacher at an all-boy Catholic school. He was also the first man I ever loved.

Right after last period,
I'd stop by to see him before I left school.
It never occurred to me
that anybody else
might think this strange.
I'd babble about nothing
while he wiped the writing
off the chalk board, banged erasers,
put the plastic cover
over each machine.

I never wondered what he thought of my devotion. Everyone I knew, my family included, treated me as if the notion that I might have any feelings was unthinkable. I just expected him to do the same. I never imagined the pangs I felt showed in my eyes.

He wasn't a big man.
His cheeks turned bluish
in the afternoon
from stubble whose replenishment
impressed me. He wore his short black hair

slicked down, smelled like
a cigarette, rolled back
his white shirt sleeves.
He'd often stand
and watch his students pound away
with forearms crossed
over his chest. I never thought
he saw me watching him.
When he'd bark
instructions at us,
it would always strike me
that he sounded like
a gangster on TV.

Of course, the other kids in class raised the first questions in the cruelest way they could. One asked him to say that he would see me later in the locker room, and, thick head that he was, he did, in front of all of them. I felt as though he'd slapped me. He could tell something was wrong, but it took him awhile to figure out exactly what.

When he got married,
I went through several reactions,
and they puzzled even me.
I could discuss them
with no one.
I felt like I was losing

my connection with him, though I'd still see him each day. I was hurt he didn't ask me to the wedding. I wished I could show him I was happy for him, though that wasn't quite the truth. I felt like I should give him a present, though, thank God, I didn't.

I had a girlfriend, too, though mine was a "beard," as they say, that I was using to delude myself.

When she (wisely) broke it off with me, I panicked. I even swore out loud in front of Mr. Martin.

He objected to my language — he'd already started distancing himself — and told me not to come to see him anymore.

I stayed home from school the next day, claiming that I was sick. I was amazed when the phone rang, and it was him.

He asked why I wasn't in school. I repeated my lie.
He said, with anger,
"What about tomorrow,

and the next day, and the next?" I heard myself blurt out, "I didn't think you'd care" And then he answered, "Well, I do."

I went back to school
The next day — though, from then on,
I'd only visit him
on rare occasions.
When our eyes met,
it was awkward.

I began to live my life outside of school — outside even my dreams.
I began to do things
I'd denied I even thought about.
I learned that love can hurt you even worse when it's expressed, even returned. Eventually, I left high school and home.

As for Mr. Martin, I have no idea if he's still alive, although he gave me my first evidence that I was.

OLD LESSONS

There's a proverb: to learn a thing, teach it.
Yet, even if you teach a thing by accident, the lesson will be clear.

Chalk dust in the air, transient white words on a black background — a contrast perhaps a bit too obvious, just waiting to be wiped away.

Through the chalky lens of memory I picture Mr. Ryan, my high school English teacher — a little man in tweed and granny glasses. He had two lists of books: one that he showed the priests, one only we would see. We could pick what books we'd read from either list. I picked D.H. Lawrence, and it changed my life. The two male friends who wrestled naked

in *Women In Love* opened my mind to many possibilities.

Decades later, I heard that, when told I was gay, Mr. Ryan remarked, "I knew the kid had problems, but I didn't think that that was one of them."

Sometimes we don't know what we teach.
They clap the erasers together and tell us to write what appears in the cloud. Later, we chalk it all up to experience.

...AND THEN CAME THE PLAGUE OF FROGS

In the early 1970s, in high school Biology lab, Father Flaherty required that every boy cut up a frog.

This was gross, but it might not have been so bad if the frogs had been dead already.

They were kept refrigerated in flat boxes that looked like they should hold pizza. They'd been chloroformed, or something. The cold slowed down body processes, and kept them in suspended animation. "Your" frog would be laid out spread-eagled on a board, with pins stuck through its four webbed feet to hold it down. You couldn't help but notice the resemblance to a crucifixion. Did I mention this was Catholic school, where we were taught abortion was against God's law because "all life" was sacred?

We were told that it was better if the frogs were still alive, so we could see the beating of their hearts. Father Flaherty did not laugh when I asked him. "Couldn't I just take its pulse?" And he was even less amused when I refused to do it that is, take a scalpel to a healthy living thing. I was surprised I was the only one who wouldn't. I was not surprised that he gave me detention. I was just as glad that he sent me immediately to the office of the principal — I didn't want to see the gruesome exercise but on my way out, I lifted a scalpel.

After my detention, when there were way fewer people in the building, I went back and used the blade to pick the lock to the lab door.

I had a plan, albeit it not that well thought out.

No one would have to guess too hard to figure out who did it.

But I didn't concern myself with consequences. I was thinking of the other frogs still sleeping in flat boxes, dreaming of warm ponds and scrumptious crunchy bugs.

I would remove the boxes from the fridge; leave them, lids open, on the tables, leave the doors open as well.

I wish now that I'd taken the boxes outside to give the frogs a fighting chance. As it was, a lot of them fell victim to the quite imaginative cruelty of my rammy teenaged classmates who, next morning, found them hopping happily all through the halls of that godawful school.

Yes, it was worth getting suspended.

I may never have been popular, but, for a few years later, I'd be legendary.

PILLOW TALK (or SYMPATHETIC MAGIC)

My pillow is confused. It's not used to the front side of my head, to slow, sensuous kisses and caresses. It didn't know it had a name that I could murmur into it. It wonders what that strange new wetness is sometimes.

Worse, now it feels pangs of its own.

It lies awake and counts the hours till bedtime, lonely for its owner (just as he is for his).

I think about investing it with magic; maybe a lock of your hair in the pillowcase, maybe a few incantations.

Then, no matter where you might be in your travels — many miles from me, and even your mind

elsewhere —
when I wrap my arms around you
you might feel it,
you might think of me
and sense my longing,
long for me
a little
too.

AFTER THE LAST MORNING AFTER (1984)

Eddie's dead. His hard night hit him too hard, or, perhaps, he'd had enough

of stumbling, drunken, through the dance-floor's flashing thunder, snorting poppers, popping pills, perusing all the other unpursue-ables.

Because he was nineteen and almost pretty in his pale, lean, half-crazed way, because his brittle little laugh cracked loudest, keeping questions all at bay, because he gave away, on darker days, what some would trade for pay, because he drew a lucid music from raw rudeness and real wisdom from one-liners, and knew

where and how and when to wear those clothes,

because he paid the cost of chaos and kept going, we assumed he really knew what he was doing; we assumed he'd just passed out and not passed on (left on the landing covered roughly with a blanket, safe since we had lugged him home.) He had been cold, but being cold was Eddie's way.

We had been through this with him a hundred times —

and, when the midday came, he'd always waken, white as bone, bloodshot, and groan from his sick stomach and hurt head. This time, there were two differences: he didn't wake, and worse, we couldn't blame him (though we also couldn't bear to blame ourselves)

Because he wore the brash mask of a bad boy, got it up and gave good head, no matter what stuff spiked his mind, because of all the blinding things he did and all the stinging little things he said, we thought he knew what he was doing, knew the way back and would wake as on so many other whacked-out mornings when the leaky popper in his pocket filled the room with fumes and we woke. choking.

But Eddie's dead, and chemicals can't cure him of this final crashing come-down.

I forget things when my battered brain's been sealed off from the hungry world I live in, colored by a drugged abundance,

but I remember Eddie, slouched in shadow, staring past the strobe-struck dancers, staring far beyond the bar-room that became his universe of youth and beauty by way of a flashing light; looking farther off than in his normal hardened pose, as if his place were then another altogether. I remember catching glimpses of the look he always wore in those rare moments, when his thick defenses dropped because he really thought nobody else was looking. His look

looked like a look
I think I sometimes wear
myself, when
I am trying, staring
silently and straining, dazed
but trying nonetheless,
when I am trying

to imagine happiness.

What he was thinking in such moments, no-one asked, and now it's anybody's guess as to who that lost boy was or what he thought, or what he felt, or even wanted. Sometimes, in a single flash of strobe that frames the dance-floor like a snapshot, I could swear I see his face, and the face I see is wearing that same look of vacant eyes and naked need —

but Eddie looked so much like many people, and the face is a mistake.

AN INEVITABLE INSIGHT

For my 30th birthday, 4/4/1985

I saw Ron tonight on the subway — first time in nine years.

With him were his strapping teenage sons. They were laughing, heading for some ballgame, for some place where I would not know who to root for (being not preoccupied enough with power politics, and also too distracted by male beauty).

Both sons are beautiful now that they look like their father.

I remember the canoe trip
with the four of us, when Ron and I
were lovers, shortly after his divorce
and not so long before our break-up,
when we drifted off on different trips
and joined each other's missing person's lists —
I in his past mind, he in mine.

But, back then, both sons had accepted me, their father's "funny" friend, a scrawny kid whose hands had always talked too much, whose hair hung down below round shoulders, so unlike their father's shoulders, so bereft of heft and brawn.

They had ignored the obvious, and let the love go where it went, not knowing it would one day go away. But anyway, we'd shared a lot that day,

so I was tempted to call out, wave, make eye contact, penetrate their heady jargon of fond slaps and gentle jostles.
But I brought myself to do none of these things, really not sure they'd recognize me,

because those boys are now the age I was when Ron was more than memory to me, when I was young enough to feel young love and love it. I let my lover go, and I grew older, but I never thought they would; all things are as we left them in our minds until time tells us otherwise. And so they got off, laughing, at my stop, not having seen me, and I didn't. I was simply dazed, too much to move, caught clinging on another kind of ride, too stunned to stand up

for another stop or two, not nearly ready to remember so much difference and distance, or to feel a sadness I had said was dead, or to see those young men I'd believed still children, or to wonder whether they remember me,

now that I see
my life, illuminated
but unmoving, like a station
standing still and
shrinking steadily,
receding
through a dingy window
as the distance
lengthens, left behind
the surging, roaring, blurred,
relentless forward rush of
this
grey
train.

CHANCE LINEAGE

My Mom and Dad both married other people briefly. In 1950, five years before I was born, they both got divorced. Rose had deserted my father; Walter subjected my mother to "indignities against her person," as The Court put it. Walter took exception to Mom's claims, which didn't get him anywhere.

Mom and Dad married each other that same year. I wonder if their exes have outlived them.

I wish I could talk to Mom's first husband.
I suspect she learned a lot of moves from him that she would later use on me.
"I don't blame you," I'd say.
"If it had been possible,
I would have divorced her myself."

But I guess I'm glad that Walter drove my mom away; their breakup spared me from a guttural last name it would have choked me to pronounce. And the personal indignities that Mom would rain on me gave me a lot in common with my harried father.
As for Rose, I guess she wanted someone stronger.

None of us can know just what has vanished in the gap between the things we want and what we end up getting. His eyes are watery. Not such a surprise since they're blue, but they're also red at the corners. behind the thick glasses with broken brown frames held together at one side by bunched Scotch tape. His V-necked t-shirt shows a chest from which all hair has disappeared. His guard uniform, long unworn, hangs cattycorner from him on the outside of the closet door.

He sits sunken in his yellow-green stuffed chair, his black and white cat sacked out on the back of it, fretfully wincing in a twitchy dream. Old books line the shelves built in the wall beside him, an assortment of odd titles: ancient *Advice From Heloise*,

World War II Chronicles, collected crossword puzzles, and Essays of Bishop Sheen.
From the left arm of his chair there hangs the cord, with red light, of a heating pad. His wife will have to watch in case it starts to smoke, or so she likes to say.
Him, she no longer watches, though he smokes a lot these days; the doctor says, "Just let him go. It's too late now."

He looks at, and past, the TV where the blurry picture rolls, for scenes he remembers more vividly than the last hour. His cousin the priest will come later to hear his confession, as if he could commit a sin just sitting here..

His son, who towers over him, now knows that hanging on will hold him here; he overheard the hospice lady tell him so.

He suspects this time will be their final visit.

Like the doctor said, "Just let him go."

MY FATHER'S FLAG

In a perfect triangle of plastic, shut tight with a zipper, sits a flag I won't unfold, presented to my mother at my father's grave by a stiff stranger in a soldier's uniform.

My mother fell apart when he saluted her. I had to hold her up, though she, too was a veteran of other loved one's deaths.

When she died, I got no flag for her, despite the fact that she spent her whole life at war with everyone, her son and self included.

But I would later find Dad's flag buried in her house, among the junk collected for a lifetime. Now it sits in my house, still in plastic, thus protected from the dust that flakes from my own flesh. I, too am at war, if only with my past, and I salute the strange man in the mirror who is some kind of survivor, certainly.
His motto?
"Scars and stripes forever."

A VISIT TO YOUR MYSPACE PAGE

for Essra Mohawk

Last night, I listened to your song about your father. It made me smile sadly.

"He was always mad as hell," you said. I remember. you mentioned how handsome he was. I remember that, too:

dark skin dark hair dark eyes dark spirit but fiery, always still burning.

He told me once that war was natural, just Nature's way to shave off excess population. I told him I thought that's why some people were gay. He huffed and shrugged that off.

He always had to be right. He had that in common with you; that, and a charm that doggedly disarms all but affection, even when a rough edge cuts.

Your philosophy, of course, is just the opposite of his.

I noticed that I was high on your friends list, though I haven't been in touch in much too long, and I was moved.

How often I forget what is important to attend to what is merely pressing. The passing of my own father was one of many things I thought might change that.

Then, I blinked; years had gone by.

LUGGAGE

From this distance we can't see the tightness of her grip this woman whose hands are on the shoulders of the boy, His back to us, his own hands clasped behind it. The train station is nearly deserted, a cavernous room that echoes every sound, But we can't hear the words she's saying. She's been talking a long time, earnest and low. Neither she nor the boy have moved a muscle; he hasn't tried to get away; whether he stays from fear, it's hard to tell. Her words, inaudible; her face, unreadable, she simply holds him there and goes on talking.

"She must be his mother," you say;
Our train is late, and we began to watch from boredom. But boredom quickly turns to curiosity when there's a mystery involved. I remind you that we haven't seen his face — no way to check for a resemblance.
"I don't care if she *is* his mother," I hear myself say, suddenly picturing my own. I know how tight *her* grip would be; I know what tone of voice *her* words would carry.

All this time kept waiting till the train, the promised train, takes me away, and still I won't move one inch further from my mother, dead at last though she may be. "I think she's hurting him," I say. Yet we do nothing, knowing nothing of the facts, which anyway are not our business.

Loudly, they announce our train; we gather up our bags.
The woman goes on talking.
We begin to walk toward stairs beyond which distant cities open like new roses. But I take one more look back.

WRITTEN AFTER DREAMING OF MY MOTHER

My mother
has to catch
a train, dragging more baggage
than you'd think a car
could hold. The schedule says
it's leaving any minute.
She refuses
to let anybody help her,
and starts
cursing those who offer.

Ultimately, she will drag her baggage down the tracks, pulled on a rope over her shoulder, heading the wrong way, aiming toward destinations she just thinks she sees, until the next train runs her over.

I will wear her ashes on my forehead, crossed there by my cousin, the Monsignor. In his head, he'll carry her confession, which blamed everybody else. In my head, I carry welts and scars and always ranting voices, the tracks of my mother's passage.

And in my own passage I trip on scattered baggage, strewn across even my dreams.

MY MOTHER'S NEIGHBOR

Toward the end,
my mother's neighbor Phil
told me he knew
"All of the dirt"
about the "way
I'd treated her."
"She told me
everything," he said —
emphasis his —
"But I don't judge," adding this last
as if I should be grateful.

The truth was, I'd bent over backwards trying to be friends with her as an adult, though it meant volunteering for abuse.

I was surprised to hear he'd bought her version of me. He had often irritated me with sneering stories of her mental illness, even once admitting that he'd hide sometimes when she'd knocked on his door.

Ironically, until that point, I'd kept an open mind about the man, despite the mean things Mom had said about him.

AFTERTASTE

Over dinner, you abruptly said that your father was dead to you already. It didn't much surprise me.

The waitress asked if we would like drink refills. We said yes.

Your father is now in his 90s. He's been sick, in the clinic unit of the condo complex you've described as "Old People's Versailles" — with its pools and indoor park of potted trees.

Back when he was in better health, perhaps two years ago, you sent him a letter it took you a long time to write — and it took a lot besides time out of you. You told him how he'd hurt you by refusing to accept you as you are. He never responded. Lately, we haven't talked about him. I have wondered what was going on.

When he's dead, you say, your sister is the only family you'll stay in touch with.

I don't find that hard to understand. Her husband, the smug preacher, has long been an irritant to both of us. Your lovely late mother I'd call a saint, but visits with some of the other Christian fundamentalists who share your blood are awkward and polite, hinging on which subjects they and we always leave out of our conversation.

And my crazy mother and my alcoholic father, both gone now — well, that's another dark domestic story.

Sometimes blood is not just shared, but *shed*, to fit into a family, when you cut off parts of yourself to "keep the peace."

The coffee arrives.
You wonder aloud
whether this recent lack
of contact is your way
of preparing yourself
for his death, of somewhat blunting
any blow
you might still feel.
You don't know
if we should even
"do the funeral."

For a moment,
I flash back
To the last funeral
I had to "do,"
the one for my long-raging
mother, who you know
did not "go gentle
into that good night."
I was the one
who had to do
the burying, the smiling,
and the shaking hands
that time.

Nobody else was left
besides her hated sister,
who had made a scene
to try to force me
not to cremate,
though that had been
Mom's instruction.
She said Mom was trying to avoid
"the final Judgment,"
though the Church allowed the option.

At last, I'd had to point out that, unfortunately, this was not *her* funeral we were discussing. She'd missed my implication.

The chatter of the restaurant continues, and the music through the speakers, the soft hits from decades in our grown-up lives. The waitress asks if we will want dessert.

We both say yes, needing some sweetness to erase the taste of things we have, and haven't, said.

HISTORY

Sun-hot cobblestones
remind me of the street
where Grand-pop Veasey lived
until he died. My uncle Skip,
poor lonely drunk, remained there
till his later death, which cleared the air
and let the house be sold.
The spoils were split
among too many hungry relatives,
our only shred of history torn loose.
No room on that street now
for such as we; the street was Elfreth's Alley,
long declared "historic"
and, at long last, all gentrified.

I wore my work boots to his funeral, and consequently got a sneer from my only male cousin, who believed the myth that his mom married "better," and that social climbing could erase your roots.

But he'd still always be descended from a long line of menial workers on his mother's side, the Irish side that gave him the red hair and freckles his aunts found so "cute."

I'd like to shove a work boot up his ass, my foot still in it — little shit. Looking back, I don't know what's become of him.

Some family connections don't mean much. These days, we've scattered over younger asphalt streets like ashes. That last fact would have surprised us once; like all good Catholics, we buried our dead in blessed soil.

THE RABBIT'S FUNERAL

We should wait till after dark, you said, and I agreed. I had gone there in the afternoon, after she stopped breathing, after we stopped crying and holding on to each other as we could not hold on to her. On both sides of the bridge, there were signs everywhere: NO TRESPASSING. PRIVATE PROPERTY. VIOLATORS WILL BE ARRESTED. And there was no place where you could walk right to the edge of the water. Neighbors we've never met own every inch of the world on that side of the tracks.

We passed the last house.

I led the way.

A camper was parked in the front yard, not far from the river.

All its lights were on, the canopy extended, a card table and two lawn chairs set outside, as if the occupants would be right back.

Dogs barked somewhere on the property to warn them we were passing.

We would not want them

to notice us. Thank God it would be darker on the bridge.

You carried her wrapped in a pink baby blanket. The bridge curved uphill. If it had been lighter, you could have seen the water through the slats under our feet. Cars hissed by us with high beams on; one low stone wall stood between us and them, another between us and the river. We were almost at the center, at the top, when an egret swooped over us only a yard or two above us, a huge black shadow set against the sky's dim glow both of us gasped at the sight and whoosh! sound. We knew it meant something. You told me later that was when you knew that everything would be all right.

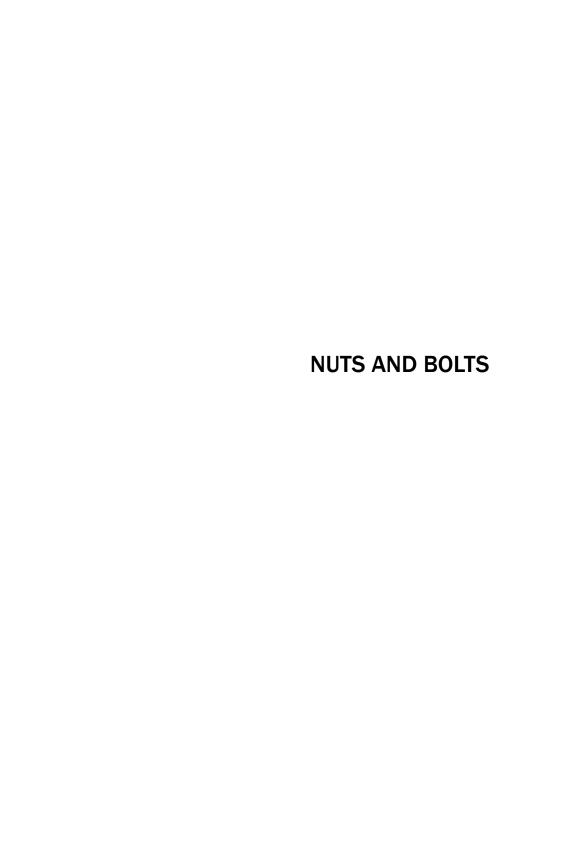
You opened the blanket so we could see her, touch her, say goodbye.

I stroked her fur, afraid she would feel stiff. She didn't. She felt like herself, though so utterly still.

She had lived with us seven years.

We couldn't afford a cremation. There was no place private we could bury her; we rent our shred of the town, and we have no yard. But we would give her to the universe, to nature. I told her that we loved her and we always would, hoping her spirit would hear me, wherever it was.

We had decided that we'd keep the blanket to remember her. You let her drop. It seemed the fall took an impossibly long time. Her small body made a large splash. We held each other once more, wept again for a few more minutes. Then we turned away to take the dark walk home. And yes, I will confess I did look back, searching for that shadow in the sky.



PUBLIC PRIVACY

When you stare at a stranger
— unbeknownst to them —
before too long, they feel it.

They feel stalked, and turn to check you out, to meet your gaze.

You look away, not wanting to invade — OK, not wanting to get caught.

Sometimes you glimpse their anger and suspicion — a stranger's admiration

is not often welcome — other times, they just seem curious, giving you

just that much in common. Either way, the contact doesn't last; there is no time

for the unplanned in modern life. And so, unknown potential

passes by, and fantasy remains intact.

MEN'S ROOM SENRYU

golden scent of piss everywhere porcelain gleams macho graffiti

magic marker words
KEEP YOUR FAG EYES TO YOURSELF
this must be the place

tin booth called a stall with a hole drilled through the wall jagged edge think twice

under the zipper under the rugged façade smoldering in vain

smell of loneliness mixed with disinfectant smell nobody is clean

no admission here no means of future contact all's anonymous

softer felt tip words prophet in the wilderness SILENCE EQUALS DEATH

zip up head home dream names exchanged, and tenderness hug pillow in sleep

THE HUSTLER

After Alexandra Grilikhes's poem, "The Statue"

A street hustler leans on a grated storefront, letting the lights of cars passing illumine his torso.

T-shirt tight with one rip under one armpit, cotton white against tan flesh, stretching when he half turns to follow eyes that take note of him.

Drivers in a slow line circle the block like sharks. Headlights make his shadow large. His mind is

hidden.

How much will the money pay for, how much more if the spirit should move him? Does he consider this war, and would the cost of a perceived loss set him off?

What is a man
to this fast-aging boy?
What's his measure
in a mirror?
Waves of heat
distort his face.
His signal
wavers,
crackling
like a sudden fire.

ROUGH TRADE

To lean against a wall and look that good requires no practice, just a knack (and a strong back).

THE SON OF MAN

Last night on State Street
I saw Jesus — or at least
a good facsimile — hustling.
He had it all:
the hair, the beard,
the piercing eyes,
the hot glare of a man
with hidden wounds.
But his righteous anger
sabotaged his efforts;
no one slowed their car
to wave him over;
no one loitered at the corner,
looking back.

This was not the gentle Jesus of the sixties, borne aloft by soft black voices. This was a Jesus turned out on the street by Republican congressmen who call their cruelty "reform." This was a new orphan Jesus — disowned, or just abandoned, by his father. This, too, was Jesus on a burning cross, but no Beatitudes would guide him. This Jesus did not have a dream.

I tried to scan him but not catch his eye; I was compelled, but not at all attracted. His hands, shoved in the pockets of his grimy low-slung jeans, could not be checked for glowing wounds. His sandaled feet looked like they would pollute most any water they might walk on. His chest was bare: his side was bruised, but whole. He was fascinating as a three-car crash jamming the world's most mundane freeway. He was the dark spot in this sea of detail, leaning on a brownstone wall.

When he caught me, I was quick to look way, to walk away, to get away; he followed, but just for a block. I prayed my thanks under my rapid breath; his childhood and mine would collide like the nail and the wood.

All I could do was save myself.

BATHS POEM

Corridors of closed and open doors we wander down like guests on some surreal game show — you pick out a stranger as valve for your pressure, as if your loneliness were only steam.

Lights in the ceiling make everyone's skin look yellow as sliced lemons propped on the lip of the mixed drink you sipped hours ago.

Unlike the sweat on glass, you can smell the sweat here — that, and the acrid testosterone haunting the halls. The towel tucked into itself around your waist waits, impatient to fall.

Eyes say "no" as bitterly as words, so some seek group-grope rooms where you can't see them, rooms drenched in darkness or steam.

Out in the light, there are some faces that your eyes might recognize:

The owner of your favorite restaurant lies on his belly, and looks away quick as you pass. The priest who made your heart throb back in high school sees you in the locker room and flees, leaps into clothes to hide his blush from head to toe. You want to tell him to relax after all, he's seen you, too, and anyway, the year's 1974. We're supposed to be beyond embarrassment.

But you're the one who's here looking for love, the one these many instantaneous rejections will leave marks on for the longest. And even invisible scars show to the eyes that prowl this place.

These cats shy away from prey that looks deep in their eyes.

A MAN MARRIES HIS TAN

Most of us want a real man for a husband someone loving, constant, who will keep us warm.

This man makes his marriage bed alone, under a lid whose artificial light seems even brighter than the sun. He's found his warmth without the stress of company. He wants to coat himself with a disguising sheen to wear even when naked. It makes him look healthy, outdoorsy, though he's always tense and spends his days behind an office door. This is more like the marriages a lot of so-called "straight" men have one for the sake of appearances, even his own appearance in the mirror, one that creates a vivid myth of vibrant health even he can believe. after all, as they say, seeing is believing.

In the old days, there was one strip of fish white at his middle when naked, to remind him that this marriage was a lie what an ironic wedding ring! Now there's no need even for that. He can strip without fear in the light, yet not expose the darkness of his life. He can behave as though he walks in endless summer, in which sun shines just for him, even when everybody else he sees is sneezing. He can be the Adonis of the indoor heated pool, the one bronze god to grace the pale-faced locker room.

Never mind how much cold air may shrink his penis; it will still be golden brown, like a good sausage.

Not that he'd let anybody put it in his mouth. No, his new true color is the only safe companion for the most private of pastimes.

It's not disappointed if his hair is not in place, if he forgot deodorant, or, worse, if he wakes up in a foul humor. It's as much a companion as those super-lifelike dolls he can't afford, which even warm to the touch and which can't be deflated, unlike his ego, so fragile, so bitterly brittle. And it won't try to compete with him or make him face Any complaints.

He won't even have to ask it to take vows.

He knows it will never betray or desert him, so long as the salon stays open and he can afford it — that's the only way this object of his love would fade.

Still, he is afraid to do one thing he feels a strong impulse to do. He won't give it a name. It would have come to him with one if it were human.
You *can* name some things you purchase, but he hesitates to treat it like a dog.

ADVERTISING FOR LOVE

The model's projecting himself through the camera lens — he's the photographer, too — like Narcissus, but he can't fall through. He smiles with blinding perfect teeth, bats long-lashed eyes clear as a lake no-one's allowed to swim in.

But I'd bet some have drowned there.

A BILLION YEARS AGO

The bar called The Brass Rail, Asbury Park, dead of winter. the sand white. his vehicle parked right outside. He had a Volkswagen van, curtains over the windows. heater blasting, a draft, icy, whistling through. We fucked our brains out in the back for hours. Took short breaks to duck inside, chug beers. Everybody knew what we were up to, watched us make out at the bar. The scandal made it even more exciting. He was bald and lean, his chin covered with stubble, with a small welt where I bit him. I can't recall his name. I don't know why we didn't stay in touch.

It was like fire in a bottle. Gulp it down until it's gone, and never think that there won't be more where it came from. I thought I knew what love was.

MY FIRST BISEXUAL

The man had a dent in his forehead, due to childhood spinal meningitis. But I fell for the strange fellow anyway. Maybe because his beard and one gold earring made him look piratical.

A potter he was, and obsessed about having a son; his constant talk about his need to have a child — which he described as "biological" — made him sound as though he had something to prove.

His last name
was Hart, missing the e
for ease. It was difficult
for him to love.
The dust of his craft
was all over him;
his hands seemed determined
to shape everything.

After being locked inside his box of fire, my eyes glazed over and I shattered. I suppose he saw me as a failed experiment.

My rival made a better vessel for his passion, with her long black hair so straight, and her egg shape. He told me that his orgasm was never good with her she'd always have to use her hand to finish him. I guess she had to reach inside herself for seeding. Her first name came from the Old Testament, so God was on her side or was He? What was that old saying about tears and answered prayers?

I saw him and his son together years from then, from a safe distance — a little blonde copy of him, soft and ripe for the shaping.

for Boruk

That 14th Street loft window's always open, even on the rainy days;

when skies become street-colored, when carwheels stream streets full of running whispers.

I am thinking of who watches through it, whose beard, barely wet, shines in the greyness;

I am thinking about drinking in his presence, in midair, with all umbrellas underneath me. I am thinking of a street above the ground.

I'm at window-level, head thrown back, rain running down my throat...

I am looking to be seen through, to stay open.

THIS POEM SUCKS

Two shaved pink globes
nestle against
a bed of beard —
lips press
to the root of the riddle
of what makes you moan.
The tongue's tip slithers
slowly to the tower's peak,
to dance around the royal crown —
purple, not gold,
with its jewels now
much farther below
than they were
just moments ago.

Lava begins to bubble in the back of the equation in your mind — and suddenly another inch insinuates itself into the ever-longer question.

The answer approaches — its prophets, a trickle of salt and a twitch of the hips, and a whimper between your hoarse orders so urgently whispered.

Sweat glistens on your abdomen. the smell and taste of you intensify.

Come on baby, I say, without a word to interrupt my lips and tongue.

Come on, I say,

Come on and prove the Big Bang Theory—
a deep truth, so hard to swallow.

RULE OF THUMB

As we kayak, an alligator's eyes and nose glide by us, and then disappear straight down.

"He's a big one," you say.

"How big?"

"From the eyes to the nose, figure a foot for every inch."

I imagine your balls on his skull above his eyes, and the tip of your hard dick between his nostrils a perfect fit.

But all I say is, "Holy Shit! He *is* a big one!"

THE MOMENT CAPTURES US

You lost control of the kayak, trying to turn it around.

I wanted a snapshot of the alligator, lounging on a log stuck in the center of the river.

The current was stronger than you were, which shouldn't have been a surprise.

The 8-foot gator turned his head, eyes on the camera, then dived across my lap into the water, as the boat and log connected. Had he lashed his tail, he might well have broken my neck, the way I know you wanted to.

Meanwhile, my camera was too cheap to catch the moment;

all I have left is a blur.

How, at the beach, he went much further out than me, riding big waves back in while I just waded, trying hard to keep my balance;

How he rowed behind me in the boat, controlled our motion; how he took my oar away from me, saying my rowing hampered more than helped;

How, later, I admired his lighthouse painting on black paper; how he took it down from the wall, out of its frame, rolled it up and gave it to me — much more freely than that other gift I craved, the gift he would deny he gave;

How I missed my train home by two short minutes and sat stranded, alone, for three hours at the station, waiting in the shadow of the angel lifting up the broken man, the great angel of metal or stone black and shiny and certainly hard, though I have never touched it the angel that my camera would not capture, suddenly run out of film a flash, yes, but nothing to keep —

Even that *Statue* of an angel, even a statue, just would not stand still for me, would not allow itself to be caught and brought home.

IN PASSING

A pang of would-be pleasure when you see his shoulder glisten just that way, the way it never will again; you know whatever happens is once in a lifetime — you've burned long enough to learn. You will never see again, at just this angle, this thing no camera captures like your eyes.

if you could, you might ask him to hold that pose, to make believe life is an art class, let your look last that much longer. But a wave knocks him off-balance,

And you turn your glance away, down to the dark edge of white sand that recedes with the tide.

RETROACTIVELY ATTRACTIVE

When I am dead, like many poets I admire, people will wish I were alive. Strangers will read my words and grieve for me. People I've lusted after from afar will wish they'd balled me while they had the chance — maybe not revising their reaction, but, at least, just for the story. They'll think of me the way I think of Allen Ginsberg.

WHEN I REINCARNATE

Forget this New Age princess Shirley MacClaine stuff.

I want to come back as a biker chick, get passed around (at first) from guy to guy like a cheap bottle that tastes better than it should. Let me get gang banged on the green felt of the pool table, and leave a deep impression of my legendary ass. Let me rock the clubhouse so they'll all want one more taste, although they never dreamed they would. Let me provide the inspiration for knife fights between the Bros, for tattoos that immortalize me till that fatal accident or liver failure.

I want to be the subject of a jukebox song, one guys will wait in line to play. Let me be that mistake that breaks up
the bland marriages
at last, and
let me be long gone
when hubby turns around.
Let me leave behind
the mark, the sting, the scent
that sticks
forever. Let me be like
the road
that left them
restless.

THREE WORDS LATER

I was just moving from one spot to another; it was nearly time for our weekly event to start. You were hanging by the doorway, kidding with another friend. who gives you criticism, about how gentle she is: "You don't love me enough to say nasty things to me, like Jack;" I was meant to hear it, and to laugh, and I did but when I chimed in to enjoy the laugh, I got more than I bargained for.

As the world segued into slow motion — like in a movie sequence, music heightening to show significance — I gently slid, while passing by, my right hand down your shoulders to your back and said "I love you;" and over-emphasized the "I," for irony;

And then I felt
a wave I couldn't see
slam into me, as if we were wading waist-deep
at the edge of the sea
instead of schmoozing in the rainy city,
(and maybe we were,
in a way —
at any rate, I wasn't
where I'd thought I was.)
Although the wave washed through me,
more like energy than water,
there was roaring
in my ears for just that moment,
and I caught myself off-balance.

You laughed. The emcee called for our attention.
We left our friend and walked back to our table, up near the front of the room.
We walked together in a way we never had before. Your face was shining, suddenly lit up by something.

I kept flashing back on the electrical charge when I touched you at the moment that I said I loved you for another's benefit; rubbing your back, saying it kiddingly to magnify your point, and it was like my touching you fulfilled a circuit that was started in the saying; sometimes when you say a thing you realize it's true for the first time —

I love you —

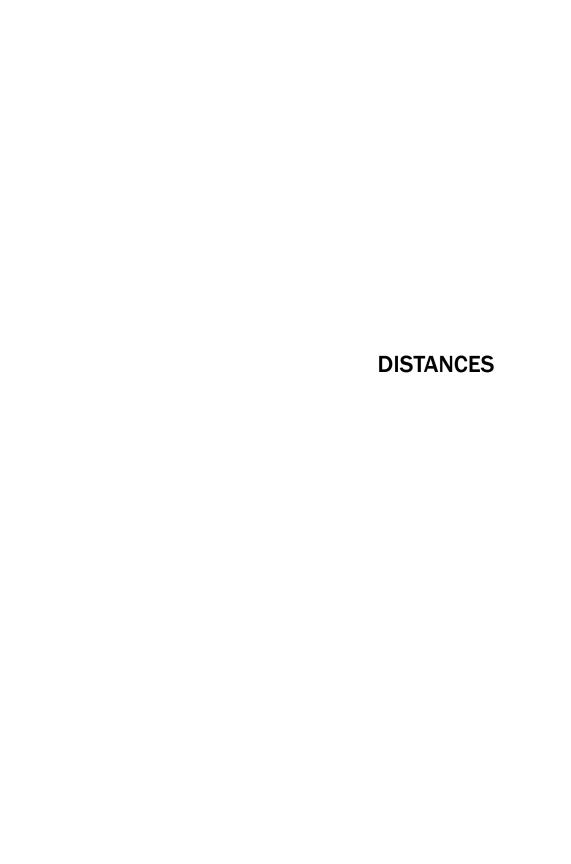
but I had no idea what the repercussions of that fact, (if there were any) might be for us, or even just for me.

For a moment after, both of us were giddy; I don't know if you knew why or even noticed, and I wanted to touch you again in any way I could that wouldn't seem invasive, and when you sat beside me, for a moment, we shared one warm pocket of space.

I didn't want to pass beyond that moment, to go back to how it was. I wanted to wrap it around me, to feel how it fit. But I needn't have worried; Now, when I look at you, I see you in a new way my beholder's eyes still catch that glow, although my mind is groping blind.

I only know I told you that I love you —

And I can't be sorry that I said it; and I also know I meant it, though I don't know yet exactly what it means.



ALIENATION OF AFFECTION

We had spent the weekend in Atlantic City, back when there was a boardwalk that had fortune tellers and amusement piers — before going there was a gamble. We were both nineteen and friends, and nothing more.

Sunday evening, on his way to drop me off, he got a costly parking ticket. He didn't earn much at his job in the shop where so many poor poets found they could afford to sometimes make their photocopies. He was upset; we sat idling in his grungy white VW outside my house, and it was time to say goodbye. Not thinking about it, I hugged him, hoping it would comfort him, and nothing more.

I felt him freeze in my embrace. He pulled back, looked at me with horror. Neither of us said a thing. I got out of the car, and he stomped on the gas and screeched away, peeling rubber in a cloud of smoke. I just stood there in shock, shaking my head. We'd just spent two nights alone in a hotel room, and I'd never made a move. And yet he was afraid of my "intentions."

After that, we never spoke again.

The last time I saw him, not long after that, was one day at the printer's where he worked.

I'd stopped by there to see another friend.

He gave me an accusing look, then fled to the back room without a word, and stayed there till after I'd left.

We had been friends, or so I'd thought, for several months. He'd known I was gay; I'd known he wasn't. I'd had no problem with our different preferences; he'd shown no indication he did, either.

I suppose I could have tried to get in touch, to talk to him, but I had nothing to explain — and was, frankly, too pissed off to try.

It was only a hug, for Christ's sake.

So many friendships fall away before the years go by — before you learn to read all of the subtle signs, the wordless signals people send, the rules that aren't spoken.

Andy, I forget your last name now but even if I knew how, I still wouldn't contact you. It was all too long ago, at this point.

Yet I still feel that moment when you froze, still see that bald look of betrayal, that's my only souvenir of our trip "down The Shore."

And there is no more naïve Atlantic City, only someplace cold and overpriced to play games where only money is at risk, where grown-ups go to take their kind of chances.

AT HOME

Nice weather today. We're standing on our doorstep, chatting.

Two teenage boys
walk by
in the middle
of the street.
They're both
staring at us
intently.
I meet their eyes
as if to say,
"What is the problem?
Is it my hump,
or the horns?"

One nudges the other and says, just loud enough so we can hear, "I told you — They're faggots.

See how they're staring at us?"

THY NEIGHBOR

The man who lives next door to us has stopped saying hello. At first, we thought he was preoccupied; he's always working on something — washing the car, filling his fountain with fish, trimming the lawn.

Then, the other day, we happened to run into him inside the tiny pizza shop that's halfway down the block. There, in a space so small there's hardly room to turn around, he wouldn't even look at us. And we were close enough to see his look of fear. It seemed to make things worse that we were on a first name basis with the workers. and that they all kidded with us. I tried to catch his eye, and swear I saw him break a sweat. I asked you, "Isn't that our neighbor?" to make sure he didn't have a crazy twin.

When he finished his business, he didn't just leave — he fled. We couldn't help but laugh — it was so strange. His wife and three kids always say hello;

so do his parents, who lived in their house before they did. And so did he, at first.

Until he thought, I guess, about what it implies when two middle-aged guys can live together right next door. Maybe it blurs his vision of the world, apparently not shared with even his own family.

But I wasn't about to pat his back and say, "Poor baby, don't be scared; we're harmless." I felt sure he would misunderstand the gesture.

HAPPY HOUR

He shows up beside you at the bar.
You've stopped in to recuperate from work before the shaky subway sojourn home. You imagine he has, too.

You've never liked him all that much. Easier to keep him friendly, though. You tell him you're doing OK and let him ramble.

He goes on about Elaine. Her cubicle is not that far from yours or his. He tells you she's a lesbian. He heard her talking to her girlfriend on the phone, then glimpsed them meeting on the street. You barely know the girl, but like her more than him — seems like a reasonable person.

You nod and grunt, expressing no opinion.
He reads this as a show of interest, keeps on talking, gathering excitement, wonders if you've pictured girls together. It's clear to you that he has.
You say nothing, stare into the depths of your beer.

He says he bets
that a real man
could change Elaine.
She wouldn't want a woman
if she tried
a guy like you,
for instance.
You check his eyes
and see
he's also pictured
that. And he wants
to plant that picture
in your head, hopes
you'll tell him
if anything happens.

You down your nearly full beer in one gulp, slap the tip on the bar, check your watch. You lose track of the rest of what he's saying. Your partner is waiting at home. This guy has no clue who you are.

Outside, you walk briskly alone. the smog-infested air seems fresh and sweet. Even the screeching subway sounds like music.

STEREO TYPES

"You're gay," said Craig, as if that made me an expert on how we all are. "Do you like young kids?"

"Like" was the loaded word, despite the lack of emphasis.

I decided not to be defensive.
"I just don't think of people that age in that way," I said, and truthfully. (My type has always been older than me).

Maybe I should have told him that men molest girls far more often than boys, that most child rape occurs within the family, a favorite crime of trusted uncles.

He was the sort who would enjoy statistics, though his T-shirt showed a picture of the Bible, with the slogan

LIFE: READ THE INSTRUCTIONS.

But we had
a gig
to get on with —
he had to do sound;
I had to sing.
We both had parts to play,
as destiny dictated.

THE SLAM GOES UP IN SMOKE

God, I'd like to take a big drag on a cigarette it's been so long.

Remembering the night
I stormed out of
the slam, sat at
the bar and filled my lungs
with burning menthol
I'd just bought
from a machine.

And the black dude who had read the homophobic poem and got the huge reaction that drove me out of the room came up and stood next to me with no idea who I was, to get a drink, and I just answered his hello like it was nothing, thinking maybe I should even offer him a blowjob just to blow his mind. And Randy, the slam organizer, sidled up to me and said, "I didn't think you smoked," and I spat out, "I don't," and left, and never came again,

boycotting the damn slam forever.

Smoke, and the memory of smoke, have teeth for me. The word "slam" has more than one meaning.

Later, I'd explain the how and why of my perpetual new absence. But for now, I'd suck the fumes that killed my father and march out into the night, a private kind of Pride Parade.

Only the taste of smoke is a fond memory, a measure of defiance, doing something that is not "normal" for me.

TO A GOOD CHRISTIAN AT THE WEEKLY OPEN READING

You don't meet anyone's eyes when you arrive.

Sometimes we say hello when we first see you — then we talk around you like you aren't there.

But we do know your name. You don't appear to know any of ours.

This week, you're wearing headphones. You will wear them until you get up to read. I hope that makes this easier for you.

When it's your turn at the podium — before you read your latest fire and brimstone rant — you say that some of us have got the wrong idea. Christians, we believe, think that they're better than us.

That isn't the case — or shouldn't be. Christians shouldn't act as though they are, since that creates stereotypes.

You know only too well that you're no better than us. You lust after women, for example. And you did lots of bad, bad things before you were saved. You know you are also a sinner.

Then, one of us asks you a question:
"Do you think you're the only Christian here?"
You look all around the room, admitting,
"I don't know,"
as if you've never really
looked at us before,
though you've been coming here for months.
There is a long moment of silence.

But, of course, nobody volunteers their truth to you. I wonder, once again, just what you want from us. I don't think I need to wonder what you have assumed about us, though I, too, have made assumptions about you.

One is that you project the category "sinner" onto all the rest of us. And that's the domino that sets all others falling.

PASTOR DAMON

The fundamentalist evangelist looks like a convict beard, long hair, one arm sleeved with tattoos but he wants to be the warden of this naïve congregation. His ministry is aimed at teens, a population easy to delude. So he plays hardball with their fear of their own hormones, their own wakening desires. He calls the ones "tormented by the demon homosexuality" to make their way down to the front at the foot of the stage, where they weep and prostrate themselves. He tells them they can "pray the gay away." One girl confesses, weeping, through a handheld microphone, that she has been called names, ridiculed, and persecuted by her "normal" classmates. Why can't she see that here's more of the same?

She volunteers herself for more abuse, of a more sinister variety; abuse that masquerades as sympathy. Pastor Damon smiles, and puts one ink-stained arm around her. Her life so far has been so circumscribed that she can't see her "helper" as he is a dangerous piece of rough trade, trying to coerce corroboration of the lies he tells himself. about himself. Self-hatred is the product this man's hawking. He swoops down on her as if she were a mouse. She only sees the shadows of the wings he wears, and not his predatory purpose, nor the slashing beak he hides behind his Jesus beard. She hasn't noticed how his first name, Damon, is one letter off from "Demon."

ON FEELING SURROUNDED

If I kissed my lover on the subway, many people would go mad.

Some of them are wives or husbands; few of them are lovers

when the word means "Lover" as I understand it.

They would make me a defendant, find me guilty of their madness and my kiss.

Through much of history I haven't kissed my lover, even when there were no subways.

Through many incarnations I was guilty, but I won't be guilty now...

And so, I kiss my lover, and he flinches, feeling watched; but flinches grinning, knowing

this is the beginning.

EYES OF PREY

I stand before my enemies, anointed in eye shadow.

I never did like purple, but I chose it because it is the color of confession. I confess I am what these hunters would aim for with their blunt arrows of fear, seeking to kill the hidden qualities
I mirror, when I paint myself for love, and not for war.

The rabbit's eyes are on the side to warn him of what's creeping up on him, to give him lots of time to flee. I am as gentle and as fragile, but I look straight on at what comes after me. There will always come a momentary meeting of the eyes, so I can haunt these predators after they chase me, wound me, even if they kill me,

I am the wild spirit shot down like a fallen star into their midst, in this country they think they have tamed.

WATER

Strike no starting pose — just jump in as you are.

So you can't dive into a pool; you don't know how; you never learned when you were young enough; now, your aging back just couldn't take the strain, but you still want to swim.

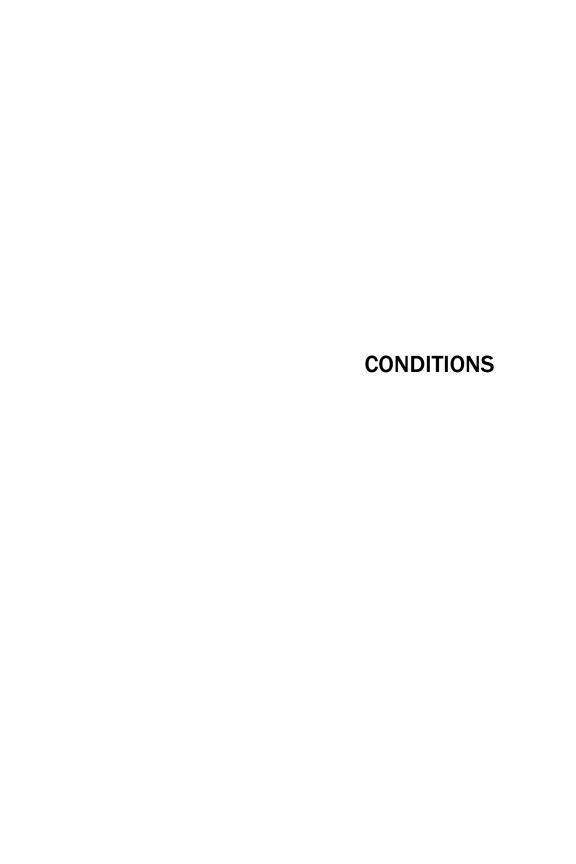
The water lets you in, opens itself, enfolds, supports you, takes its cue from you, breaks up in splashes when you thrash your limbs, shapes itself around you when you wade,

closes behind you when you sink and disappear deliberately.

Once, at the Jersey shore, that crucible of childhood changes, you went wading chest-deep through the waves, letting them lift you and carry you backwards. You were minding your own business, having fun. A nearby blonde boy called you "Faggot." You asked, "What?" He said, "You heard me."

You had, but you didn't get why. The water held you, just the same as it held him. The sea clearly had room for both of you. Pools and lakes are even more accepting than the ocean, not resisting you at all, like some long-time love who freely chooses you.

Let the water wash what weight we bear away. It's wide and deep enough to hold us all.



Lately, gulls invade the parking lots of restaurants we often visit.

When I was young, I only saw them at the seashore. I can't guess what's driven them inland — far from waves, wet sand, and shellfish washing up for them to eat. Maybe they like greasy diner food.

I always found the sound of them unsettling — those cries that seem so lonely even when there's a whole flock; what are they mourning? My grandmother said they were dead souls afraid to be angels. But her husband hated them. They'd swarm his boat, hungry for bait. He swore they scared off the fish.

Once, he yelled obscenities at me for feeding them. I had to stop. Then one swooped down and snatched his hat right off his head, and dropped it in the sea. Maybe that's why I've admired them ever since.

They are white, like the souls St. Joseph's nuns scratched on their blackboards with loud chalk. I still wish I could see them gliding over white-capped water.

But, my limits being what they are, I'll settle for a parking lot a fittingly earthbound setting in which to be reminded of my old, and never quenched, longing to fly.

PIGEONS

When I worked at Morrow's Nut House during high school, a pigeon flew in through the front door, held open too long by an elderly lady while she lugged in one bag too many. Grey-headed, red-footed and gurgling, the bird dodged my broom and fluttered under the display case glass, flopping down on a sticky arrangement of bright green jellied candies, huddling there as if to hide in the midst of its own ruffled feathers. It cooed and clucked and poked its head around, and looked up curiously, and didn't peck me when I picked it up, took it outside on Market Street, and gave it back to a warm breeze laced with exhaust fumes.

My next task, dictated by my sour-faced old maid boss, with pale hands withered like dried fruit, was to pick out what fragments of feather and other debris the "damn bird" might have left behind, and put the candy back out there for sale.

I did as I was told,

remembering his heartbeat in my hands, and how my mother always said pigeons were filthy, full of lice and strange diseases. He hadn't seemed itchy or sick, just a little perplexed — and when he'd flown away, I envied him.

I didn't last at Morrow's Nut House. I got fired for calling off due to a favorite uncle's unforeseen demise, and never held a pigeon in my hands again.

Now I only stop in Philadelphia to change trains on my way to New York City, which I only visit rarely. In 30th Street Station, there's a food court; if there's time, I find a table and I write.

There's always a pigeon or two that gets into the station, and wanders on the floor between the tables, bobs its head hunting for scraps, cooing and burbling.

One table I picked was spattered with white droppings.

People ignore the pigeons or they feed them, killing time till the next train. I watch and wonder at their lack of fear, clutching a ticket I'd never need if I had wings.

GULLS, PIGEONS, AND HARE KRISHNAS

Gulls perched on the wall watch humanity pass with no apparent interest. When you can fly, what else grabs your attention?

A Hare Krishna told me once whatever fills your mind most often determines how you'll be reborn.

If you fixate on sex, you'll come back as a pigeon. "A dirty bird," he said, sounding like a grouchy grandpa.

I pointed out to him that pigeons can fly.

Flying seems exhilarating when you can't do more than dream about it. And I dream about it often. Always have.

Hare Krishnas, on the other hand, I only see in dreams if it's a nightmare. Those who cannot fly hang out in airports, knowing what they do in spirit can't come true until they die, and airports are a sort of consolation prize. There, Krishnas fixate on the folks with lots of baggage, who can't get away as quickly; them, they'll stop and badger with their version of the truth.

Gulls and pigeons bring only a song gurgles of warmth, cries of release, the language of the winged who know only this moment, who can fly without waiting in line to buy a ticket, whose truth waits for them somewhere high in blue air.

FAMILIAR STRANGER

The man has a stone in his pocket; smooth and black, it has the power to absorb a person's pain.

He never uses it, though, just keeps it with him — in case. It's small, flat, light, fits easily with keys to houses he no longer visits, and the coins he will not spend. His pocket crowds with possibilities.

He walks with his head down, always afraid he might fall — or worse, someone might see the look in his eyes. He hoards his secrets, and he hides his love.

After the winter, he tells himself, he will peel off his dead skin, and allow the sun in. Till then, the season may surround, but cannot touch him.

NYC SUBWAY VIGNETTE

Freezing February night. Switching trains.

Manhattan subway stop — wish I could remember the street number. Near a college, the sign said (can't remember which one).

Been about 25 years, but I'll never forget what I saw there:

Long, narrow platform; no one on it on foot but me and a beat cop in uniform. Station deserted except for him, me and a couple of homeless guys passed out on two of the benches. I didn't care, being too nervous to sit anyway.

Anyway, this cop strolls up to one, twirling his nightstick as if it were a baton. Suddenly he grips it by the handle, hauls off and slaps it hard against the soles of the guy's feet. I thank God he's wearing shoes. The loud crack makes me jump, although I saw it coming.

The guy barely revives, looking up puzzled, luckily anesthetized on something strong.

The cop says, voice ringing out off of the concrete, "Those benches are for PEOPLE, not you guys." Then he looks back, flashes me a smile, white as a blackboard soul drawn by a nun under his little Hitler moustache. He expects to see approval in my face. I feel sick, look down. I can't meet his eyes. I can't let him see my revulsion or, even worse, my fear that he'll focus his agitation on me. Please, just let me be, I think. Don't make me part of your mad trip to nowhere. I'm just in the wrong place, wrong time. I worked late. I'm just trying to get home.

THE SLOW MURDER OF TAYLOR MEAD

Taylor Mead, Dec. 31, 1929 - May 8, 2013

Taylor Mead, a fixture in the Lower East Side as well as Andy Warhol's Factory scene back in the day, died yesterday while in Colorado. The legendary Lower East Side artist, poet and actor died after suffering a stroke. The 88-year-old was temporarily living in Colorado after vacating his longtime Ludlow Street apartment in April. The rent-stabilized space, which he lived in for 34 years, was costing him just \$380 a month. He "was battling with a developer who is converting the rest of the building's apartments into market rate apartments."

—5/9/2013 obituary in *The Gothamist*

Andy Warhol made a film about your ass an hour of just your butt. He even called it Taylor Mead's Ass. I never saw it the film, that is. Well, I never saw your ass, either. I only met you after you were old, a beloved Lower East Side character brimming with stories, keeping alive and vivid certain moments in our history when it seemed like all doors had been thrown open. You could hold court like the best of queens although you lived in squalor as a pauper, you had royal memories. You swept away realities that might make squeamish

your delighted listeners, and let us all laugh at a past when things were sillier and simpler, when a soup can could be art.

But Taylor, now your celebrated ass is nowhere to be found. It's not like the scarecrow in The Wizard of Oz saying, "that's me all over," although you would have camped it up at least that much. Perhaps it wasn't quite as literal, but you were torn apart, nevertheless and flesh and blood, unlike a mess of straw, can't be scooped up and stuffed back in. And the figurative sometimes can prove fatal.

You were 88 years old when, at long last, your sneering landlord murdered you. You'd lived in your fifth floor apartment for 34 years, just one year less than your landlord had been alive. You'd been one of the last tenants left, hanging on to your rent-controlled flat, in the building he had turned into a dirty, dangerous construction site,

so people were forced to evict themselves or face extinction by their own environment.

And so you lived with constant hammering from dawn till night, plaster in your hair and eyes, roaches crawling up your legs, holes drilled through your wall, a constant fog of dust.

A younger person would have found all that nightmarish — hard to imagine how you lived with it for months.

Nearly 90, you were so feeble that you could barely stand.

You'd only leave the place a time or two each week — the journey down from the faraway top floor was quite a trek for you.

But your landlord, a millionaire brat who had just entered middle age, seethed in a chronic rage that rent control prevented him from charging more than four hundred a month for your absurdly crumbling hovel. All around you, having driven all your neighbors out, he built more passable apartments,

planned to rent them out for nearly eight thousand a month. His company was, after all, called Magnum Real Estate, named for the notorious gun that made Clint Eastwood's day. The man identifies with deadly weapons. He kept on making matters worse and worse. The nightmare he put you through lasted for nearly a year.

At last, gasping, you gave up on breathing dust, and you signed some sort of agreement, and you went to stay with relatives in Colorado, planning to "come home" soon to New York. But less than a month later, a stroke killed you. And let's face it one stroke was brought on by another, a stroke of fate that where you lived became the property of a rich pig whose greed just endlessly expands, free of all conscience or of external restraint. You just joined a long list of this rapacious monster's conquests: along with the low-income nursing home he razed, replaced with new luxury condos, or the lady who required a rescue

after his crew had ripped out her staircase. You were just another object in his path to be torn out and tossed away. Your spirit was so strong that your reaction was delayed a little bit, but there's no doubt where the blame lies; just weeks ago, a friend predicted this would kill you, and was quoted in the press. "This is elder abuse," he said. "It's pretty Third World when you think about it." Predictably, the landlord didn't listen. In fact, another paper quoted him as saying he deserved "a pat on the back" for all the renovations he was doing. I say,

curse the bastard forever. Let Fate "pat his back" with a sledgehammer — better yet, a wrecking ball.

ONE COLD NIGHT

An icy night;
The pavement
was a slippery sheet
of danger underneath
even the surest feet. I stepped gingerly
out of our small car
onto the drugstore
parking lot. It was dark;
the only light
shone over the back doors.
Carefully, I waddled
toward the light,
in steps too small,
for fear of falling.

A van was parked three spaces down, its motor running. A small, frail old woman got out of the passenger side, wobbling, unsteady, with a cane. She looked as if she'd break if she should fall. She looked pained and afraid. She looked at me and asked, "Sir, can you help me?"

Though the ground kept threatening at every step to slide out from beneath my feet, I said, "Of course," and I gave her my arm.
We toddled toward the store.

Suddenly her son —
well, I assumed he was —
burst from the van behind us, slammed its door
behind him, hulked into our path,
a big bear of a man.
He thrust his scowling face
so close to mine
that I could smell smoke in his beard.
"WHAT'S GOIN' ON HERE?" he demanded.

"She asked me to help her," I said. He snatched her roughly away by her thin arm —

I feared for a moment she'd fall —
and muttered angrily,
ignored her explanations,
as he yanked her toward the store.
Me, he never gave a second look,
and I was, frankly, glad of that.
But I wondered, if the guy
felt so protective,
why he'd let her
walk that far on ice alone,
and hadn't even helped her
leave the van.

Then I stepped, grateful, down the frozen concrete stairs, felt warmth and light surge over me, saw shelves of fragile and expensive gifts — ceramic frogs with fishing rods and such.

For a moment, I forgot why I was there, lost in the gleam as it hit me.

Then I turned toward the back counter to refill my medication for depression.

SISTER SNAP

A photo catches three nuns walking past a wall spray-painted with graffiti in a foreign language somewhere in America.

One nun looks back at the photographer, and thinks Fuck you in English.

Unlike the graffiti, her look, I can read.

RAIN DANCE

for Ron

You ran outside to dance under the cloudburst, get yourself drenched, tempt the lightning.

You peeled up your T-shirt, pulled out the waist of your jogging pants, both front and back, to catch as much rain as you could, then struck a goofy ballet pose. And you kept looking back at us, grinning to please your dry-humored audience, safe behind the store front window.

"You know, he does no drugs or alcohol," your former girlfriend told me, "He just gets like this naturally." I laughed, dismissed the strike of inner lightning waking up the dancer long asleep in me, whose wounds no longer let him run out in the rain.

BARE-HEADED

If the man who has Style is going bald, he doesn't buy a hairpiece; he shaves his head. You go *with* the tide, only faster.

— Quentin Crisp, in An Evening With Quentin Crisp

The bald man likes things clear and clean. His loss was also growth; he beat the tide to shore, razor in hand. he cut his losses. They say that bald men have more hair on their bodies than on their heads, that being bald betrays a greater potency. Even the Buddha chose baldness and this from a man who'd transcended desire.

The bald man is brave.
He will not wear toupees.
He will not hide his beacon under hats.
He demands you take him as he is before you even know his name.

The bald man waves to Death across the desert, as if welcoming him gladly. After all, how much of a threat can the hooded Death be, compared to a man who shines the naked truth?

PICK-UP

It'd be nice to meet a nice guy, she thought, wandering down the hill to the dirt road that passed her parents' property. Or just to get stoned, added the devil on her shoulder. She thought she was smart. She thought she knew the way the whole world worked, although she hadn't seen that much of it. She thought she was tough defying her father, wearing tube tops, smoking cigarettes.

The pick-up had no license plate, but she could only see it from the front.

The driver wore a baseball cap, like every other guy around these parts.

His windows were rolled down, but she could smell the sweet-rot odor of pot smoke.

He leaned over,
popped open the door
on the passenger side.
She caught his smirk at her
and glanced uphill
at her family's sagging house, feeling
a fleeting spooky twinge,
but never dreamed
that this would be
her last look at her home.

It would be about a week before the local paper noted that she'd vanished, and dozens of men in baseball caps would fan out through the woods in search of her — half of whom had picked her up at that same spot, though only one had done more with her than just flirt. All of them knew the girl was jailbait.

FERAL CHILD

At first, they thought it was a raccoon rooting through their trash, leaving a mess on the back porch.

But one night, Lizzie got a glimpse of him.
After she switched on the light, he was gone in a second.
She never saw a person move so fast.
Though it was fall and cold, the boy was naked, but she barely saw his body.

For that instant, her eyes got locked with his: wide, green, wild, and full of — was it fear? His face was framed in crazy hair that stuck out on all sides and had leaves in it, (and lice too, she would have bet). Then he was a blur, shooting off toward the trees.

She'd been half asleep,
And stumbled back to bed.
She'd sleep no more that night,
though there would be
no more disturbances to hear.
How old was he, she wondered.
It had left her, not afraid,
but more unsettled,
her old view of life disrupted
by this unpredicted possibility.

She woke up her Charlie. He called the police. They went out back with flashlights, poked around. One stepped in human dung wiped on dry leaves. The other said they'd had a similar report about a week ago — a woman down the block — and she'd been able to describe him. He didn't sound like any missing children from this area. Liz shuddered, picturing a tribe of missing children living hidden in the woods, something like Lord of the Flies.

But she felt sure That this boy wasn't missing; he'd been lost since birth. His parents were not looking for him. She felt sure there were no words for what he'd been through. She wondered whether she should leave food on the back porch, keep the kid from messing up their trash — well, OK, keep the kid from starving. She flashed briefly on him catching birds for food, dismissed the image quickly lest it clarify too much and nauseate her.

As far as they knew, he never tried their house again. But from that night on, she would keep the cat inside.



SUBTEXT

At the local K-Mart, an announcement interrupts the music service a mechanical male voice that says, "Service needed in Men's Wear."

The music comes back on, plays for one bar.

Then another announcement, and this time the robot voice is female —

"Help needed in Cosmetics."

Once more the music resumes. The customers think that they're shopping, as they dance to tunes they don't consciously hear.

Men need service; women need help.

...LIKE A GREEK STATUE

He's just like anyone you'd meet in Greek mythology.

—Dianne Chambers in "Cheers"

All the Greek gods got frozen in stone forever, as if they'd seen Medusa. And they were all naked at the time. And they all have such tiny schlongs.

You'd think turning a man hard forever would incline to have the opposite effect. I guess it was cold in ancient Greece.

Photography, sadly, cannot improve on sculpture. And even if you rub stone, it only gets warmer, not larger.

Some non-prescription pills sold by our late-night infomercials would have been a big hit on Olympus.

MEDUSA

Long after the hissing had driven me mad, long after the venoms had twisted their roots in my brain, he finally came:

naked
except for his shield, bearing
a sword — symbol
of liberation in religions
I would never live to see.

He would not look at me, but at my image mirrored in his shield, the shield he clearly didn't bring to hide behind; he had nothing to hide. His nakedness was beautiful. His sword would liberate me

from my body and its thousand passions I could never quench. I felt them rage for the last time as I looked at him, flooded with grave fascination.

Even if he could come close, the lightnings in my hair would strike him down.

I lived beyond touch — a high price of my own bitter nature.

So I looked at him, and drank him in, and let him stalk me, longing for the slice to cut me loose from my unbearable awareness, from my sleepless smoldering. I met his eyes in that mirror, and gave my consent, burnt out from centuries of living in my head.

Of all men, he alone would glimpse my face reflected there and live, and notice it was radiant with anguish, and be haunted by regret.

Better to be turned to stone, believe me.

LEDA CONCEIVES

In our modern era, the majority religion in some countries has a myth of a divinely sired child god born from a human woman's womb. His insemination was spiritual, mysterious a miracle; announced first by an angel, though his mother never had a choice, although she did give her consent. She was handed a prediction it would happen, and instructed about what to name the boy. It was clear to her one must obey an angel of the Lord, acting on orders from his Boss.

But sometime earlier, in ancient Greece, where nobody pretended to be anything but pagan, they had myth makers who did things

differently. They saw no need to say it wasn't rape.

So Zeus did not appear so civilized. He sent no angel with polite announcements, though the thing did come with wings, but there were no pretensions of humanity.

Some women say all men are beasts; some gods are, too. sometimes — this one did not deny it. He fixed it so that she could not consent, not even had the thought occurred to her.

It seemed
an attack from the wild,
a pure burst
of brute force,
and not from a human with whom
one could argue or beg.
It did not seem
to happen
by design
at all, divine
or otherwise;

No, she was taken by instinct, and, afterward, her own instinct took over.

The animal in her knew what to do.

When she woke up beside an egg, after a bloody sojourn through unconsciousness for — well — God knows how long,

She didn't know where in her body it had come from, since her shape looked as before, and since the pain throbbed everywhere.

She only knew she must protect it, hide it, keep it. And she knew this with a fierceness she had never felt in any other knowledge. She would not have long to wait.
She feared that what came out might fly away — and, she admitted to herself, half hoped it, too.

But when the shell broke, there were no wings to unfold, although there was a flash in which the fragments of the shell evaporated, and its viscous fluids with it. The small, silent explosion left no evidence of anything unusual.

She learned soon
that it was only the next day,
that the whole pregnancy
and hatching
had unraveled
in twelve hours, like
some wild wine-distorted
nightmare. She might
have told herself
that that was all it was,
were it not
for the hatched brood,
especially
the girl;

the girl
with luminous
and haunting
eyes,
the girl
that no man
could resist,

the girl
they would call Helen —
a name whose meaning
her own story
would infuse
forever
with a lethal beauty,
a girl whose streak of the
divine
would not require proof
like a halo,
or wings.

OLYMPIAN CHESS

A whale is swimming in the wine glass on the chessboard.

Zeus takes a sip, puts the glass back.

The whale, startled, thrashes its tail, spurts a geyser of wine from its blow hole.

Unlike Zeus, the whale is getting drunk, drunker and drunker with each breath it takes.

Elsewhere on the board, the gladiator, angel, duck and frog are plotting their escape in whispers.

Zeus, who knows everything, finds this amusing to no end. But he makes a mental note not to give the pieces consciousness next time. Across the board, Hera — whose mind he cannot read, since she's a woman and his equal —

cooks up her own plot, and discusses it with no one.

PREY PER VIEW

National Aquarium, Baltimore, MD Shark Alley Exhibit

You descend into the Shark Alley exhibit, walking slowly down a ramp that takes you deeper; with dark red carpet silent underfoot.

The three-story tank wraps around the dimly lit space that contains you; its outer glass is your walls, too; you have air on your side — water is on theirs. Inside the tank, the sharks will circle you continuously, since there's nowhere else for them to go. There's only room to swim in one direction.

As you descend, the sharks come swimming toward you; soon they pass behind you, then turn back, just as you turn down one more level of the ramp, like the next flight of a tall stairwell, and you find the same sharks facing you again.

At least, it seems like the same sharks. They're all big, and all look somewhat alike. You really aren't sure how many sharks there are.

The only sound's the ventilation system, and the low hum of the tanks. You wish there were some music, and you tell that to your friend, and he makes you regret it right away — he grins and starts to hum the theme from *Jaws*. You elbow him; he laughs and stops.

All the while, the sharks keep circling you, the way they would if you were in the water, where their circling would foreshadow an attack. They'd be checking you out then, noting your size, your speed, your smell, your seeming weaknesses, reading your tiniest pulsations.

In here, you don't even know if they're aware of you. You can see them why shouldn't they see you? but they don't seem to notice you. They glide as if the tank were the whole world, both earth and sky to their black eyes. They almost seem mechanical, not quite alive. But you, your heart pounds and your breath comes fast. For once, despite the greyness of the day outside, the dullness of the job you'll focus on again tomorrow, you're acutely sure that you don't want to die.

SLASHER MOVIE

We see from his viewpoint, through holes in a mask, and yet we don't identify with him. The point is not that we see what he sees; we see what his victims don't see, and thus, feel more afraid for them.

What, are they deaf, too?
Don't they hear the music
warn of his approach?
How easy life would be
if music warned you
when bad scenes were imminent.

The victim is a girl, of course, oblivious and vulnerable, ripened to be sacrificed to lusts she has no clue that she's inspired. No, she isn't being punished; it takes awareness to commit a sin.

But the killer is unaware, too — his victim is not real to him — and so we label him "crazy" as if that explains him.

He has no motive and no motivation;
He even has no face throughout most of the movie.
He has only camera eyes — they just record for later fantasizing — and he has the knife, the only tool with which he'll penetrate.
We assume all this is sexual, of course.

For this man — we assume it's a man — to kill is just a habit, a mechanical compulsion, fueled by impulse that arises, automatic, when it's triggered by the proper stimulus.

The girl must be half-naked and young, and must try to survive once the pain wakes her up. *Her* motivation, we all understand.

She's the one who just wants to keep breathing.
We identify with her, and, for a little while, we aren't bored to death.

I WANT A LOVER WITH A NAKED FACE

The mask is wood, inflexible — not meant to move with the face. Its expression is fixed, carved in and painted on. Anger moved the hands that made the mask, and under the anger hid fear, like a long-buried face.

The mask is lacquered, red with yellow streaks smeared on its cheeks; its eyebrows, strips of pelt left over from some luckless animal. Put it on, and see the world through holes, as if the world were what is missing. Perhaps the maker meant to hang it on a door and not a face — as a warning, and not a disguise.

The killer in these movies wears a mask, always; to hide, not his identity, but ugliness from his deforming childhood, or from the trauma of a fire; when you finally see his true face, it's too late, as if the mask alone were not reason to run.

Perhaps the mask protects the killer from the mirror he's not brave enough to face. At least it gives his victims more fair warning than a mask made out of words — or the sighs and caresses that say, "It won't happen again."

They make leather masks for consenting adults, with zippers to seal off the eyes and mouth, should you need someone else to oppress you for fun. Children don their masks at Halloween, when unreal faces seem most festive; it's such a giddy game then, while they still think it's all play. In societies like ours, we start them young.

THE SPIDERMAN POEMS

He doesn't have 8 legs, but he does have 8 inches; funny, one sees no evidence of this through his tight costume.

Tarzan did it first — swinging from one big phallic object to another.
Of course, Tarzan's points of reference were not designed by architects who had to compensate.

Sometimes he's more brutal to villains

if he gets up on the wrong side of his web.

Peter Parker picked a peck of something radioactive, so they say.

they? You know — the guys with the thought clouds.

He wanted to join the Fantastic Four, but they wouldn't trust an odd number. Superstition, they said (as they knocked on wood).

An example of comic book censorship:

they couldn't say his wrist device "ejaculated" webbing.

No one believes his favorite song is "Up, Up and Away" that is, until you cite its author: Jimmy Webb.

He watched the play Kiss of the Spider Woman while hanging from the chandelier above the audience.

His upside down perspective was not what caused his discomfort.

His orphan status proved pivotal to his world view.

His philosophy was based primarily on the wise teachings of his Uncle Ben —

no relation to the rice tycoon.

Bungee jumping de-mystified him for a lot of people;

suddenly nobody was impressed anymore when he'd go swinging from one building to another.

The thrill-seekers chase after only feeling;

range and choice of location, and precision in your destination make the difference if your life is not the only one at risk.

(Plus, en route he gets to peek in people's windows). ***

The superhero support group wasn't only his idea; everybody thinks it is because of his neurotic reputation.

He agrees it fills a need, though there were those who'd ridiculed it — notably Hulk and The Thing.

Ironic that they'd be the ones to shock the group by breaking down and crying in each other's arms.

It wasn't pretty.

So, he wonders — do you tell your only living relative your true identity?

He asks his buddy Batman. Batman puts him on hold, then puts Robin on the phone.

Robin is the more "out" partner.

AN ANECDOTE FROM SHOWBIZ JOURNALISM

Once I interviewed an actress/ singer/ model who wore shades and a full-body, tight gray leotard, which had a hood that also hid her hair. As we chatted, I could see her nipples, but I couldn't see her eyes. She seemed quite high on something.

We sat in a dim club where she would sing later that night.
The place would be packed by then.
She'd be carried in on a Cleopatra-style sedan chair by some nearly naked boys; she'd be nearly naked herself. Nonetheless, a smoke machine would cast a fog around her.

I asked if her father, a minister, approved of her showbiz career.

She told me that he'd just broken his leg, and had to wear a cast — she thought he looked so funny! Then she laughed/shrieked wildly and long. My glasses were transparent, but, with hers so dark, she couldn't see my eyes. It struck me as a tad ironic that her name was "Grace."

Then someone officious appeared, to dismiss me; it was time "to run through something," so he said. Clearly, they regarded the 10-minute interview as a big favor to a little newspaper. It was 4 PM — early for them, I guessed.

Now, I would go back to my well-lit office, and attempt to craft some sort of article from a few facts and a lot of fog. I had a headache wearing shades would never soothe.

PITCHMAN

in memory of Billy Mays, 1958—2009

Burly and bearded, shirt sleeves half rolled up, he holds up his product and barks at the camera in a voice pitched higher than you would expect. His tenor's not the lone surprise.

It seems he's always selling something different: super strong adhesive, putty that seals leaks, a wash that smells like oranges but cuts through years of crud when rubbed on any surface.

He looks like a bear and sounds like a songbird, albeit a loud one; his smile is so white, it could blind you — anyway, you just can't help but trust him. You thank God he doesn't sell religion.

You hear there's a fan club of gay men who wish he would bed them, but he's faithful to his lucky wife. You see him on the tube practically every day for decades.
When you hear that he's died suddenly, you feel a pang.

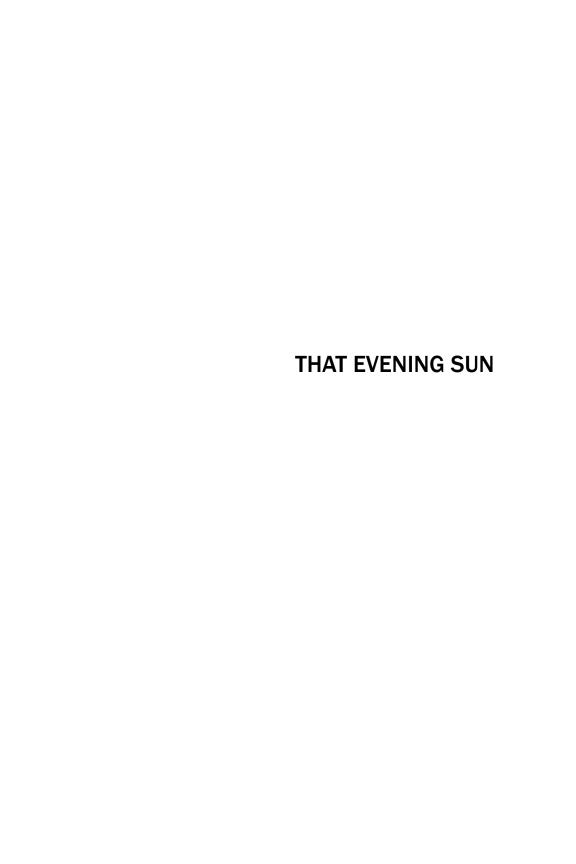
You wish you had opened your wallet, and not just your heart.

PUPPET

They call him "Dummy" carved from clacking wood, needing a human hand shoved up his back to sit erect and talk in someone else's voice. Even his personality is someone else's so-called "character" the mouthy creep his owner won't dare be, except onstage, hiding behind him.

But when slumped lifeless on a straight-backed chair, at last he tells his own cold truth:

behind his eyes, dead trees, dreaming of leaves.



DECADES LATER, FOR MY LATE FRIEND STEVE

All these years after your death, I'm told that everyone knew how I felt about you, though I never breathed a word to anyone, not even you everybody in the class we took together chronically; even your lover Bob, apparently, those nights I slept on your couch, way too drunk to go home. He knew that I was drowning and was kind to me, and made no confrontation.

Years later,
when I had a lover
of my own,
you reappeared,
and newly single;
you brought poems
and photographs
that found their way
into the paper
where I worked.
You worked
at the drugstore

at 15th & Spruce.
I'd stop by
to say "Hi,"
and have a soda; we'd both
keep it light.

I would hear that you were dead before I even had a clue that you were sick. It was so sudden in those days, the "new disease" nobody really understood yet — swooping down the way a hawk would on a squirrel.

I'd no longer looked at you as I once had;
I'd still had no idea that you knew.
You must have — everybody else did, so they told me.

I wonder,
when you came
to reconnect,
if you hoped
that I might still be free.
I wonder
if you didn't know
that you were ill yet.
I wonder

if I dodged a bullet.

And I wonder, if I had been free, and you had known and told me, if the knowledge would have stopped us — old friends just crazy enough to die for love.

PROSTATE CHECK

My urologist flicks out the lights and shines a flashlight through my sac. "See the way it lights up like a Halloween pumpkin?" he asks, cheerfully oblivious, apparently, to how my belly blocks it from my view.

He kneels before me; gently — mostly — feels my balls; makes me bend over; shoves a finger up my butt.

It is as intimate as I have been with anyone of late.

No surgery this year, he reassures me — not this new year in my old age.

SALLY

Sour-faced Sally was a scary-looking hard-ass who dressed like a businessman, but swore like a longshoreman; a strange choice to hire for sales, I thought. Still, I liked her at first; she could be funny in her blunt, crass way. But, as you got to know her, her cold center would become more palpable.

She'd read some of the notebook on my desk, she said to me one day, as if that were her business.

Then she'd added with a sneer, "You're nuts.

I feel sorry for you."

Never mind what kind of mental hygiene it must take to go through a co-worker's private things.

Or being too illiterate to grasp his poetry.

One night, several months later, with a bottle of Jack Daniels by her side, she shot herself in the head. She didn't leave a note.

When they told me she was dead,
I wept. I no longer know why.
Why shed tears over someone who'd been cruel to me?

Perhaps it was because I understood that pain, that drive to blow out the harsh lights. But my crazy notebook takes my bullets for me—to this day, all these decades later.

Sometimes I think that you really do have to be crazy to stay in this world.
And when I do,
I write it down, and think again.

FOR ANOTHER DEAD FRIEND

Sadly, our last talk was awkward.

I didn't know how ill you were. In fact, I didn't even know that you were ill you hadn't told me, And our contacts for so long were limited to telephone, now that we lived so far apart. All I knew was that you were angry with me with no real reason, so I thought. I held it against you silently, later wrote you a polite note of response without expressing my real feelings, never heard from you again and wrote you off in my own head, despite our three decades of somewhat distant friendship.

I learned you had passed via telephone, too, from a mutual acquaintance,

who told me as if it were an afterthought, beginning "oh, by the way..."
I couldn't make myself believe it.
The next day, your partner called — clearly, while going down a list — and gave me all the details of your funeral. There was no more denying it. All I could say was, "I'm so sorry."
There weren't words for how sorry I was.

But I never made the service. My own partner was in the hospital, and unexpectedly, for something serious but, thank the gods, not fatal; not like cancer, which eats people to slow death relentlessly, inexorably, like that anger, like the words we never say.

NO BODY REQUIRED TO REACH HERE

In memory of Alexandra Grilikhes

words, the body that's drawn from air by the movement of will
—from "Watching The Dance" by Alexandra Grilikhes

My late friend's poem still holds her energy:
I don't care what other poets say, she's still present in a way that many of them will no longer be when nothing's left of *them* except their poetry,

"Wasn't she a lesbian?"
they often ask,
as if that ever made
a difference —
these guys who never
would have had a chance in hell with her
no matter what she was.

She was, by the way, beautiful — and she still is, now that her energy is free to resonate, no longer bordered by a body

and yet bringing life unending to her words.

REPRIEVE

Relief at last after living in fear; after the days of unknowing, seeing your loved one prone with tubes hooked up to him.

The doctors and nurses were kind, reassuring, and careful to tell you the risks. You nodded, kept your cool you didn't want to rock the boat. Your terror was a quiet sea you rode, and hoped that only you could feel (not wild, true, but plenty deep enough for drowning). But,

when the waiting ends, they tell you all is well.

You sit beside him while he rests safe, still sleeping and you breathe, grateful for your breath as well as his. You wonder how you lived for so long, not taking a breath; how you could fail to notice you'd spent that much time not breathing.

SUNDAY REFLECTIONS

You sleep upstairs as you did all day yesterday, and as you've done, so far, all day today. You've had another episode of illness; fiery pain, a Friday night in the ER. waiting behind a long line of assorted winter injuries, laid on a gurney in a hall, less than half-sheltered by a paltry screen no rooms were left until they poked and prodded you at 3 AM with bleary-eyed, caffeine-wired bedside manner. Yet you still want to put off the surgery that could prevent another reoccurrence. I watch you hurt and give what help I can, give argumentative advice until you listen, take the medication right, with milk to kill the nausea; but surgery's another matter, one on which you will not listen.

I am a hovering pest without wings — but one who, at least, hovers out of love.

Once you are home in bed I hit the stores, buy bland wet food you will not eat, cancel my plans the moment I get home, wait while you sleep in case there's anything you need. And find strange peace in doing so, released from endless self-preoccupation. Outside, the wind howls angrily as if to say, "Come out, I want a crack at you." But all I need is safe in bed and snoring reassuringly, a droning sound of constant comfort, like the soft crash of the tide to those who live not just beside the sea, but by it.

GRIN AND BEAR

We argued in your truck out on the road.

I can't remember the subject, only a welcome interruption: as you flashed your hot blue eyes at me, a black bear came scampering out of the woods into our path, oblivious to us as you, the driver, were to him. I laid my hand gently on your thigh. "Look," I said, in a quieter voice than either of us had been using.

You did. You saw.
As if feeling
your eyes on him,
the bear looked up at us.
Startled, he jumped straight up
into midair, like some old
cartoon character — all four paws
left the ground at the same time.
He turned and scampered
back into the woods —
and that's
the only verb for it;
delicately, like a romping lamb.

We both forgot our argument. We'd both known that this area had bears, but neither of us had seen one before. We shared a grin, and drove on in delighted silence. I left my hand

AN IMAGINED INTERACTION

And so I asked you, "Can I touch your beard?"

You didn't answer, but I took your look as "yes."

"It's soft,"
I said. "It looks rough, but it's so soft."

And then a kiss dissolved a lot of recent history.

SUPPORT

You sit with me before my surgery and stroke my hand, and softly lend support; Awhile without a word, yet you report a wealth of subtle sentiments to me.

The nurse pops in, and says that the I.V. may pinch me; I don't let my face contort, wanting to seem brave and polite. We court the best blood pressure with infused tranquility. It's time to go. The doctor shakes your hand as if we're at a sports event. I say "I love you," as you do, with confidence.

They wheel me off. Though I wear no gold band, I feel your presence near me when I fade.

I'll wake wrapped in your silent eloquence.

HOME

Now that it's quiet here, and that our times together are, as well, what holds me here is not — as I had hoped — frantic desire, but peace, and the promise of more.

The long journeys we made in search of something we could not identify

have found their end here in this calm, where we fell into family.

TO PEOPLE WHO COMPLAIN THAT MY POEMS ARE "TOO DARK"

How dark can anything be that turns a light on in your head, no matter what it lets you see?

INSPIRED BY LINES FROM THE TAO TE CHING

There is no greater misfortune than having an enemy.

— Tao Te Ching, tr. Stephen Mitchell

He sees his former friend on the corner, turns to avoid him, takes the longer way home.

Old betrayals dog his every step, though the sun shines on this clear day. The past is a voice in his head, louder than the birds chirping away, the rustle of the spring's first leaves.

Out of sight if not mind, on the corner, his former friend stands still, not thinking of him.

UNSPENT

Sometimes exhaustion is the only thing you feel.

They call it being "burned out" — as if you were a house after arson;

now empty of life and the comforts it carries, stripped down to a shell, all hollowed out.

And it's true, you *do* feel like that.

But you still have the capacity to feel.

Unlike a knifed Jack-o'-lantern, whose flame must be borrowed,

the light in your eyes is your own.

CAT NAP

In memory of Suzie

Rest your face against the black and white cat's long, relaxing back, stroke her soft belly, bury your thoughts in the purring and fur as they surround, suspend and supersede; let go, drift off, and dream yourself a kitten in her womb, and dream the world a waiting ball of string.

CONSTANTINE CAVAFY

Openly gay poet and Classicist, 1863-1933

From all the things I did and said, let no one try to find out who I was.

An obstacle was there, transforming the actions and the manner of my life.

— Cavafy, *Hidden Things*

Cavafy was a wise man and a kind man, who watched other people struggle with deep empathy. He could easily imagine

how they saw and what they felt, even across long history. Even the minds of the Gods

were no mystery to him.

Of his own heart, we do not know so much — oh, we know what he felt, if not for whom; he had devoted family and friends, but kept his loves "a secret life."

It was very brave of him, back then, even to tell us they existed, and their gender.
The urge to know more is a symptom of our time, not his.

At the end, killed by an illness he'd at first tried to deny, he briefly raged against the Greek Orthodox priest who offered blessings at his deathbed. Then he relented and received communion. Through his words, he still communes with us, whether from Heaven or Olympus.

TO A BUDDHIST FRIEND WHO WORKS WITH PRISONERS

for Jim Smith

This convict says he wants to see the ocean, and it puts things in perspective.

He had asked you what was your ambition; you'd replied, "attaining certain states of consciousness," which sounds pretentious to you now.

You can't ignore the poignancy of people whose mistakes freeze them in amber; maybe that is what attracted you to want to work with inmates to begin with.

Meditation only liberates the mind. You come to listen, and you're free to leave. Hard to imagine how life limits those you try to help. Now and then, their statements startle you, striking an unexpected chord.

The Buddhist books in which you found your ethics cite Samsara, the great ocean of illusion.

Yet here a man gives as his goal in life his hope to see the ocean, the mundane physical ocean — with his eyes, not with his mind.

You are stunned by how that humbles you.

THE MADONNA'S REVENGE

There have been several instances where statues of Christ in Catholic churches have been purported to bleed, and the Church has claimed some of them are authentic miracles. I think one thing the Church needs is a miracle that makes a statue of Mary bleed, but not from wounds.

The lady has had it; had it with healing the simpering sick, with having to hold serene smiles for breast-beating buffoons; had it with the boredom of enforced virginity, with playing second fiddle to her self-effacing son, with twenty centuries of meaningless novenas praising her subservience. She's worn too long the heavy halo of the uncomplaining, unpaid live-in maid. So, she begins to bleed... not from driven nails or thorny crowns, not out of guilt, not to atone for any actions not her own, not as some mythic man-made martyr she bleeds as a woman. The sad blue gown, for centuries her prison garb, is soaked through with deep red. The flow, held back for all her unlived lifetimes,

pools around her proud bare feet. Her breasts, too, swell with sudden fullness, nipples hard and heady with fresh milk but this time there's no baby boy to suck her wellsprings dry; this time. the surge is pure pleasure. Now the chapel air is wet with womanhood, its smell more rich and powerful than any priest's pathetic little censer. The worshippers are terrified, but can't avert their eyes; her smile, no longer trite, is now triumphant. The next time she appears to children, she will bring a message on her own behalf, a truer testament.

OUR LADY OF GRACE

The Queen of Heaven stands with downcast eyes, her statue placed on a small pedestal so, sitting, I can meet her gaze straight on.

The serpent underneath her feet seems to be smiling.

Cloaked in light blue — the color of healing, some say; some, the color of Spirit — she carries her sadness with dignity. This is her secret.

Crescent moons cut in the brass candle cup cast long shadows from a lily-scented votive. Stray breaths send them flickering across her face.

Her eyes, painted on plaster, wait to weep, unendingly — yet seem to see, unnervingly, unblinking.
I clasp my hands and whisper Latin words

I do and do not understand.

For a change, far from guilt, far from Church, I lit this flame of my own will. I set the bowl of sea salt at her feet, there in the North, where things begin.

Mother of God? Perhaps but she is my mother as well no matter who may label me a sinner.

I have come here to claim her love as mine by birthright, and I feel the heat of her belief in me.

I bow my head. I close my eyes. She takes my hand.

We walk among the lilies.

THIRTEEN O'CLOCK

We start counting over after twelve, we say, because that's just the way things are; not, certainly, because we fear the number that comes after it the proper number of a coven's members; the number of apostles if — admit it — Christ were following Himself; the number of those Fridays that fall on us now and then, when no one dares to walk under a ladder or break any such taboo; the number of a certain floor some taller buildings simply refuse to acknowledge; the number whose digits add up to the quantity of elements that magically comprise the universe in metaphysical philosophy that intellectuals deny;

the number whose existence we deny as we insist we're always starting over rather than just going on.

JACOB AND THE ANGEL

They tell you Jacob wrestled with an angel.

They don't tell you it was erotic.

It lasted all night. It damaged Jacob's hip and left him limping —

for no lover desires to be forgotten, whether human or divine

It was significant that the angel did not win.
There was no penetration — only orgasm, spontaneous as rain, also accompanied by thunder (though that noise did not wake Jacob's wives).

And yes, the angel blessed him as requested, but would not tell him its name, claiming its name was the same as that of the place where they had grappled all night long;

and he gave Jacob also a new name; also the name of a place;

as if to say that where you stand is who you are;

and he left Jacob, now called Israel, to wake lost in the ruins of their love, knowing the man

would say that it
was just a battle,
not admitting
to the kisses
that transformed him,
claiming rather
that he'd triumphed
over God, not telling anyone

that God is what you love in other men, and also what they love in you.

ABOUT THE ANGELS

Long ago, before the New Age vogue for them, I heard a bearded poet in a battered leather jacket say he "had a thing for them"; he loved the marble statues of them, sad and solemn, posed forever among tombstones in the old Louisiana cemeteries.

More recently, I heard the spoiled young daughter of a well-to-do churchgoer say she "hated" them; anyone who'd own an image of one had no taste. She looked smug in this judgment.

When I was younger and more literal,
I pictured them
with feathers; they were men
whose shoulders sprouted
giant pigeon wings — no, gull wings,
all white, made
of bone and muscle, and yet
giving off faint light.
I wondered if their movement made a sound
Like that of birds.

Now that I have seen them, I know better

than to try to fit their likeness into words.

All I know is that you only call on them when you are really desperate, and that the sight of them will turn a young man grey, and that the shattering vibrations one feels when drenched in their presence leave you deeply shaken, and forever chastened.

ENTER THE BEAUTIFUL

Enter the beautiful; bearded, magnificent windows.

Enter the beautiful; enter the men who were strangers.

Enter the beautiful, enter the future where light lives in ashes half-hidden, where baskets hold hands.

Enter the beautiful, breasts bright with something like sweat, but less solid, more mystic. Enter the beautiful, rain painting outlines on all the invisible people whose presence you always suspected.

Enter the house with no windows because of no walls.

Enter the essence of windows, the essence of beards, the sweet odor of sweat, the sweet odor of light;

Enter the lips

of the wizard, the mountain of minutes. Enter the beautiful, enter the forest

of genitals, empty jails, absences

birthing wild birds, wild birds born with ideas.

Enter the blood-tub where age is misplaced, where the photographs dance with abandon.

Enter the beautiful, enter the ugliness finding rare glimmers in mirrors. Enter the beautiful, be entered by it, be burned till you are something burning, be filled

with the forest, the entrance, the dance

that begins and begins ...

ABOUT THE POET

A 2010 nominee for a Pushcart Prize, Jack Veasey is a Philadelphia native who has been living in Hummelstown, PA for over 20 years. He is the author of eleven previous published collections of poetry, most recently *Shapely: Selected Formal Poems* (The Poet's Press, Providence, RI 2013).

His poems have also appeared in many periodicals including Christopher Street, The Pittsburgh Quarterly, Assaracus, Harbinger: A Journal of Social Ecology, The Philadelphia Daily News, The Painted Bride Quarterly, Fledgling Rag, Oxalis, The Blue Guitar, Bone and Flesh, Zone: A Feminist Journal for Women and Men, Film Library Quarterly (Museum of Modern Art, NYC), Experimental Forest, Tabula Rasa, Wild Onions, Mouth of the Dragon, Asphodel, Insight, The Irish Edition, The Harrisburg Patriot-News, The Harrisburg Review, The Princeton Spectrum, The Little Word Machine (U.K.), and The Body Politic (Canada), among others. His poems have also appeared in a number of anthologies, including Common Wealth: Contemporary Poets On Pennsylvania (Penn State University Press), Sweet Jesus: Poems About The Ultimate Icon (Anthology Press, Los Angeles), and A Loving Testimony: Remembering Loved Ones Lost to AIDS (The Crossing Press, Freedom, CA).

His plays have been produced by Theater Center Philadelphia and Theater of the Seventh Sister (Lancaster, PA). He has hosted literary radio programs for WITF FM in Harrisburg and WXPN FM in Philadelphia. He was awarded a Fellowship from the PA Council On The Arts and is a two-time honoree of The PA Center For The Book's PENNBOOK celebration. For many years he hosted poetry readings in the Harrisburg area at The Art Association of Harrisburg's Paper Sword series and at Encore Books and Music, Borders Books and Music, and Open Stage of Harrisburg, and also taught poetry writing courses at Harrisburg Area Community College Community Education Center, Martin Memorial Library in York, and for the Dauphin County Library System. He is a member of Harrisburg's notorious (Almost) Uptown Poetry Cartel.

Veasey spent the seventies and eighties working as a journalist for such publications as *The Philadelphia Inquirer, Philadelphia Magazine, Pennsylvania Magazine, APPRISE, The Philadelphia City Paper,* and *The Cherry Hill Courier Post,* and editing a number of periodicals in Philadelphia and New York, including *The South St. Star, The Philadelphia Gay News,* and *FirstHand Magazine.* His articles for the *Philadelphia Gay News* won two awards from the national Lesbian And Gay Press Association. He recently wrote an article on Walt Whitman's relationship with his longtime companion Peter Doyle that was syndicated to 40 periodicals nationwide by the Gay History Project, followed by another article about Whitman's involvement in the United States Civil War.

A singer as well as a poet, Veasey has released one CD album of original songs, "Build A Fire," as lead singer of the folk-rock duo Open Book. In 2010, Veasey released a CD single of another original song, "Whether Or Not The World Knows." He formerly sang second tenor with the Harrisburg Gay Men's Chorus. He has been with his partner in life, David Walker, since 1978.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Poems in this collection have appeared previously in the following publications and anthologies: Assaracus, Below The Belt. Vol. 3: Erotic Poetry By Men (Poem Sugar Press, Ed. Carla Christopher, 2014), Celtic And Queer: The Irish LGBT Experience (Squares And Rebels Press, Ed. Wes Koster, 2013), Christopher Street, Fledgling Rag, Fox Chase Review, Gay Roots (Gay Sunshine Press, ed. Winston Leyland), Half Life (Red Pagoda Press pamphlet, Ed. Craig Czury), Heat, Mouth of the Dragon, Philadelphia Gay News, Poet's Tour of Harrisburg (Good Sport Press), Son of The Male Muse (The Crossing Press, Ed. Ian Young), The South St. Star, Sweet Jesus: Poems About the Ultimate Icon (Anthology Press, Eds. Denise Duhamel & Nick Carbo), The Truth of Blue (Wit's End Press, Ed. David Walker), Wild Onions, and Zone: A Feminist Quarterly For Women And Men.

The poem "A Man Marries His Tan" has undergone radical revision since its original 1970s appearance in the magazine *Mouth of the Dragon*. Aside from its premise and its title, it now has little in common with the first published version.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book was typeset in Adobe Garamond Pro, a modern adaptation of a classic letterpress font. Modern Garamond faces are based on the work of Claude Garamont (c. 1480-1561), and italic designs by Robert Granjon. Adobe's OpenType version of this font was released in 2000. Poem titles and section titles were set in Franklin Gothic, a type family created in 1902 by Morris Fuller Benton. Widely used for headlines in the hot metal era, the typeface was neglected for many decades in favor of newer sans-serif headline faces. Several additional faces, including Alternate Gothic, were added to the Franklin Gothic family to make it more versatile for headline design. Franklin Gothic's clean, modern look has led to its use as official or logo type for New York University and the Museum of Modern Art.

The cover art is one of the oldest known paintings of a dancing male figure, from the Tomb of the Triclinium, near Tarquinia, Italy, circa 470 BCE.